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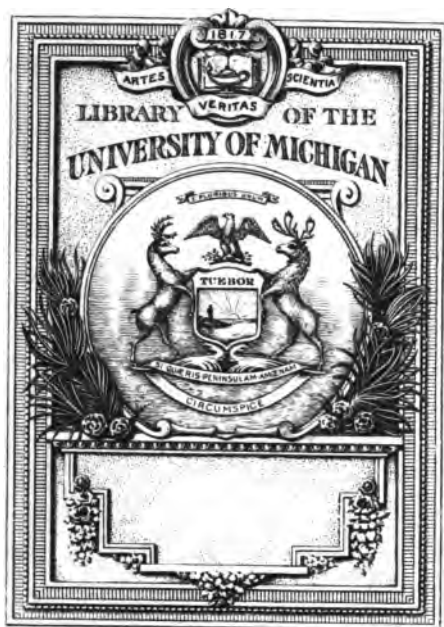
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A WOMAN'S QUESTION
CONSIDERED IN STORY

ARTHUR BECKETT



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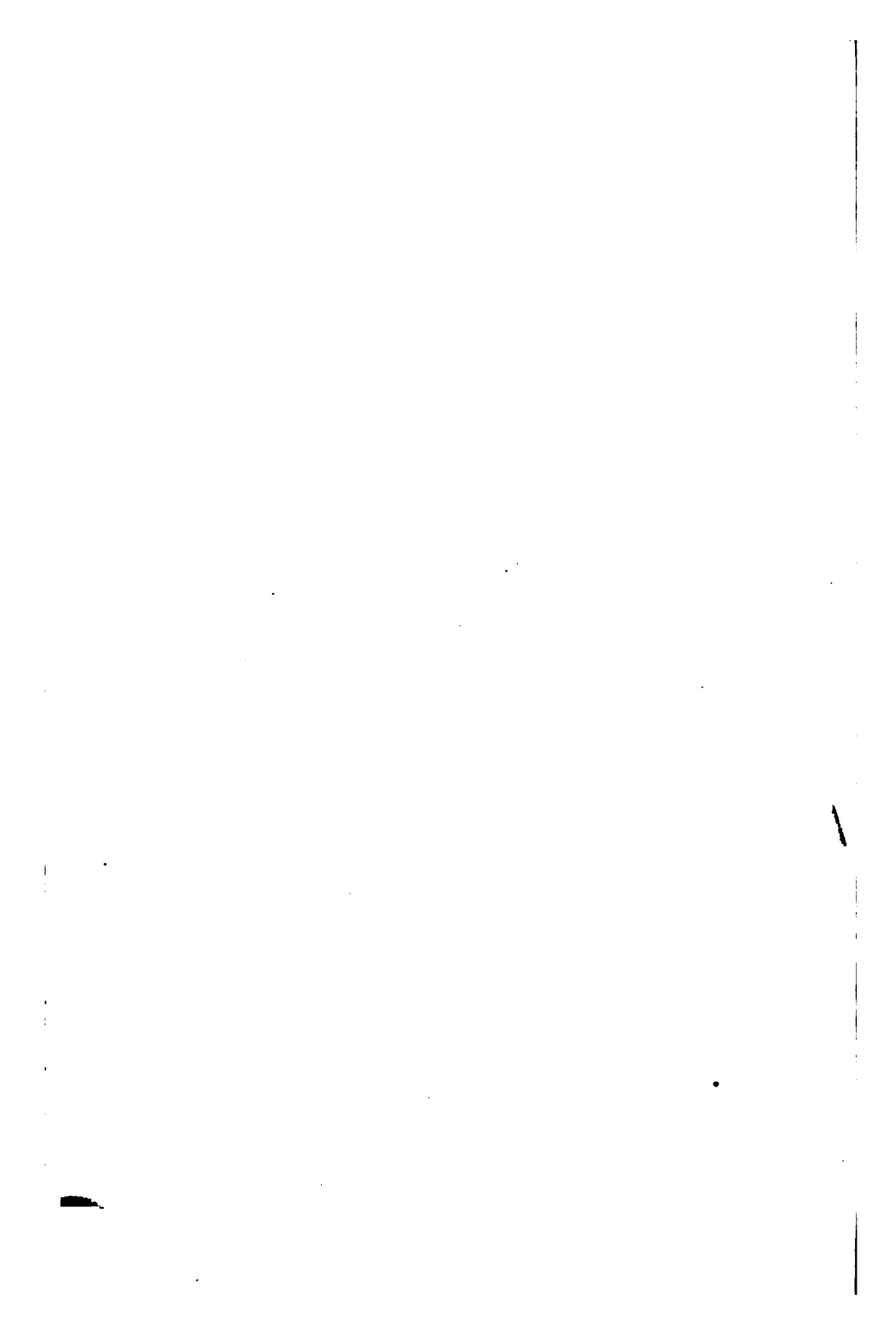
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FOURTH EDITION



Dedicated
TO
MY WIFE



2.62
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I

6-6-44
O

PRIDE of family, born in the hoar past, dead but yesterday, has fallen pitifully to decay among many of those in whose veins there is yet the strain of good Norman or Plantagenet blood. It is an irony of life that of the great material changes that have taken place in the history of Sussex, none has been so marked as the deterioration that has attended many of the county families. Names that were great when England was in the making may be found today among the peasantry : Pierrepont, Poynings, Culpeper, Lewknor, Challoner, De la Borde, often corrupted, are the only evidence of those houses' former fame and power. While the names exist, the vocations of their descendants have sunk to lowliness. A Du Deney has been found among the Southdown shepherds, a Lewknor follows the plough, and the last of the Culpepers, who tends the farm, would, if told of his far-away progenitors' omniscience, pause to wonder mildly at what he heard, and then again drive his spade deep into the soil.

Of such fallen fortunes were the Woodhams of Halnaker. They lived almost in poverty : their life was one of eternal Lenten days, but, true to their blood, they wore the affliction proudly. Tradition was discreet on the point of the family's immigration, which was supposed to have occurred centuries back, in the days when lance and battle-axe asserted men's right to ownership. Underbreath rumours alleged that the family name, registered De Wodehame, was recorded in " Battel Abbey Roll " ; it was certain that ancestors, though not remote, had owned broad acres of surrounding fat land. The immediately preceding head had lived beyond what the receipts of an already decreased estate justified, but daily had afforded a clean white cravat ; had been accustomed to hurl his jack-boots at his servant, when their polish fell below the demands of his fastidious taste ; and had possessed a family vault in the parish churchyard, the filling of which was ultimately completed by his own shell. His manner of living had perfected the wreck of the family fortune for the inheritors, who thus

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perforce declined to the position of tenants of a small part of the land their ancestors had owned. The riches of John Thornton Woodhams, the present genitor, were accounted in the number of his family: thirteen boys and girls, strong, lusty, ever hungry and vigorous in growth.

This young family dwelt in a dull farmhouse, formerly occupied by the late proprietor's bailiff, and ran wild in an old garden that had become a tangle of trees and lesser vegetation. The family coat of arms, wrought in Sussex iron above the front door, from which the old brown paint was peeling, was the daily reminder of the former proud position of the line, and a facial guarantee of the pedigree of the present descent. In other ways the family were ordinary bread-and-cheese persons, continuously in debt to trusting tradesmen.

Farmer Woodhams was a handsome man, with noble features, the refined bearing of an English gentleman, and the inheritor of his father's passion for inebriating liquors—for which he considered his troubles were sufficient excuse—his father's ease of disposition, and carelessness in financial matters. He had the carriage of an aristocrat, and, when in Sunday dress, might have been taken for one. But when about the farm he generally wore a gaberdine, and, except on market days, a pair of boots in which Walking Stewart might have tramped from Land's End to John o' Groats. Baldness, that had set in like a decay of herbage, increased his dignity; a habitual stoop of shoulders gave him an air of permanent condescension. Thus he could look a gentleman with the wolf nigh the door.

His wife had not sinned in cultivating the luxury of physical habit. Her neat person was small and narrow, the roses had been gathered from her cheeks long ago; but she bore the signs of faded beauty in the jaded look common to poor women overburdened with children and domestic trifles. She worried on account of the difficulty of educating her family, their need of clothes, and the necessity of presenting an outward respectability to a commenting world. She sacrificed herself in doing good to her children, and, in poverty's way, to her neighbours. Thus her hand was often the companion of her heart; yet she was one of the world's shrinking ones, who often trembled when she had done good for fear she had done wrong.

On the appearance of the first girl after three sons, these two parents, overjoyed at the birth of a female, already had talk of their hope of other daughters. Hope was so strong within them that they gave it name in the name they chose for the child now born and two others desired: Faith, Hope and

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Charity were the mother's choice. The greatest of these virtues, as set forth in proverb, being Charity, such was the name given to the new-born child.

Faith and hope was long the adopted motto of the parents Woodhams. There was no regret for the prelation of names when, in eighteen months, came the second girl, who was registered Faith. But at length hope died, for "Hope" was never born, and the line of boys was continued, seemingly the stronger for the break in sex.

The superlative qualities of the family spirit were inherited by Charity, the fourth child, a girl of precocious aptitude, intuition and marked originality. In early life she was not merely a maid, but a romance, brimming with curiosity and ambition, possessing pronounced ideas on momentous matters and ready and willing to step out on the highway of life. In these respects she possessed a young man's brain to govern her maiden's heart. In other ways she desired the unforeseen; yet it never came to pass; no new face, no incident which differed from those of every day, presented itself to satisfy her desires. Yet for her the world was a thrill, and in the contemplation of these desires she found her happiness, and her brightness filled the house: a ray of sunshine imprisoned in a cage.

For her education Charity Woodhams owed a debt of thanks to her maternal uncle, William Ticehurst, managing clerk to a firm of solicitors settled in Old Hastings. Ticehurst's wife had sacrificed her life in giving birth to his only boy and child, as good a copy of a dead wife's image and ways as fond husband could desire. To observe the beloved dead in a dozen traits of the little lad was a pain to the man, but it was a pain that he loved to hug. He indulged the boy's every whim, as he had indulged the wife's; so far as a weekly five-pound salary would allow, the child had all his desires. Then Fate dealt Ticehurst a second truncheon stroke. His boy—his miniature of his wife—was drowned while bathing; and the old, middle-aged man tottered through his days heavy with sorrow.

As life advanced he came to see the need of a companion, and applied to his sister for one of her elder children, with promise of food, clothing, lodging and education as recompense. After discussion the parents were willing that he should take their elder girl for a short term of years. He thus secured Charity. He did his best for her, took much pains with her education, and did not neglect to bestow on her some

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tenderness of heart. Bearing his boy's untimely death in mind, the first step in his niece's training was to have her taught swimming. She developed the art, and joyed in it, when her uncle exhibited a sudden eccentricity in peremptorily forbidding her ever to enter the water again.

She was thus left to find other amusements. She came to have likings for the mild gaieties of the dull parades : the bands, the buzz of people, the rattle of life—for themselves and for the passing hour alone. There was no suspicion of flirtation in her bold glances at passing men, no predisposition to forwardness ; gaiety for itself alone was all she craved.

A hot summer day pressed her with a temptation she was not strong enough to resist : to break her uncle's command and bathe as she willed. With hair kept dry, her uncle had no reason for suspicion. Thus she broke his commandment once ; then again and again.

An incident occurred at the fourth transgression, which frightened her from further disobedience for that summer at least. With her uncle's permission she, in the company of a friend and her friend's husband, was out one hot moonlight night on a small private yacht, anchored off the shore at the conclusion of a local regatta. The three, expert swimmers all, felt tempted to the water. Bathing costumes were pulled from lockers, the ladies came from the little cabin, two plunges and they were cleaving the ripples, striking out after the man, who was already ahead, seaward. Charity, the best swimmer among them, was leading at the fiftieth stroke. The water was delightful, the scene romantic, and the intense darkness was broken only here and there by the lights of neighbouring boats, and a wide path of moonlight. Twenty minutes of this delight when the man's voice called that they were going to return. Another dozen strokes forward, and Charity turned to race back. She clambered up the suspended ladder, and emerged on deck with words of her enjoyment of the swim, to discover suddenly that she was in the midst of a group of young men who were enjoying tobacco on the deck of quite another yacht. She realised the mistake at once, apologised, explained the situation, asked for the position of the *Esmeralda*, and was over the side swimming towards it before the party had recovered from astonishment. It was her last swim at Hastings.

On winter evenings her uncle's semi-silent habits drove her to books, and in them she found an unimagined joy. An ambition to know a foreign tongue, and a liking for music in language, prompted her to French literature. She now began

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to learn and wonder, to form ideas and develop curiosity for subjects she had hitherto never suspected life to have held half-concealed.

Her five years' residence with her Uncle Ticehurst was terminated by his death, and, by his will, Charity found herself in possession of a legacy of fifty pounds. Her grief for her loss of him was tempered by this gift, not on account of the benefits she herself might reap from such a sum of money, but its acquisition immediately suggested to her a plan that would give her real pleasure. Letters from her mother had acquainted her with the deplorable condition of the finances of her father, who was hard-pressed for the want of money in the working of the farm. Generosity prompted her to offer him the little bequest, and she lay awake at night revelling in the anticipation of the pleasure it would give her to surprise him with the gift she would press upon him. The train, which bore her home, moved slowly enough towards the moment for the realisation of her scheme.

She found the house in a state of consternation. Her mother, whom illness had kept from attending her brother's obsequies, met her with true kindness, but with a white, anxious face, which, if in keeping with her mourning, seemed out of place with the welcome. Her younger brothers appeared under a suppression of excitement, and displayed more curiosity than demonstration in receiving her after her long absence. Her father came in and commented on her growth, said he was very pleased to see her, but that he was sorry she was compelled to wear black. In the temperate nature of these remarks Charity observed him under the same cloud that appeared to cast its shadow on the other members of the family. Looking round she observed that her young brother William was not present.

"Where's William, mother?"

Her mother smothered a sob. Charity was pained with a sudden alarm that predicted evil. Her father answered the question:

"William has got himself into a scrape through disobeying me. He set fire to one of Mr Viney's new wheat stacks this afternoon. He went to Mr Viney's barton to smoke cigarettes, although I have expressly forbidden him to smoke, and accidentally set the stack a-fire. The damage is forty pounds, and the worst of it is the stack, being newly-built, was not insured. I can't pay for it unless I sell stock. Times are bad with me; the affair could not have happened at a more awkward moment."

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"But where is he?"

Her mother told her with sobs:

"William is in prison."

"William in prison, mother!"

Her father corrected: "It's not so bad as that yet. He was caught by Marshall, Mr Viney's bailiff, and locked up in an outhouse. I have been to see Viney about the matter, and he says that unless the money is paid before six o'clock this evening he will hand the boy over to the police."

Charity's brain was working. After a pause she asked:

"How much did you say the stack was worth, father?"

"Forty pounds. If it had been worth a hundred it would not have hit me harder so far as ready cash is concerned. I intend to go and see Mr Viney again presently, and offer him goods to the amount as security until I can raise the money. That's humble pie for a Woodhams to eat at the hands of a man who made his money out of ironmongery! A few hours in the woodshed won't hurt William. It'll teach the boy a wholesome lesson."

"Let me go and see Mr Viney first, father."

"Your visit would do no good. He's furious. He would hardly listen to me when I saw him. You know what a temper he has. He would only be rude to you. You can't coax a mad bull."

"I should do no harm. I will go. Who knows? He may show more feeling to a woman than to a man."

"Well, don't plead with him. We've our pride somewhere."

In less than an hour Charity returned with the scapegrace William. She had paid the forty pounds, and secured the Squire's receipt with her brother's liberation. It was sufficient for Mr Viney that his tenant had found, as he believed, the money. Charity gave her father an uncompromising story of the interview, promising him a fully satisfactory account in the near future. With that he had to consider himself gratified, and this proof of his daughter's power of argument increased his faith in her a hundredfold.

The true story of Charity's liberality came to light two days later when John Woodhams attempted to thank Mr Viney for not submitting his family name to the disgrace of a police court stain. He was touched, but his pride was hurt, and it cost Charity considerable pains in her endeavour to prevent him from bringing a calamity on himself by selling two of his best cows in order to reimburse her. The incident did much in gaining for her her father's esteem.

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II

THE face of Charity Woodhams was an open index to the greater part of her character. A far-away look in her eyes, often to be caught there when her hands were employed in the domestic duties that fell to her lot, revealed her as a daytime dreamer. When her spirit was roused those eyes sparked dangerously. Normally they were calm, wide, and of a pronounced pansy-brown.

In many ways the girl might have been regarded as an example of the consummate, feminine creation of her time. She inherited her father's aristocratic build of figure, improved by reason of its youth and exquisite womanly grace of contour. Her walk was always a processional progress, and had she worn robes it would have appeared stately. Such a master sculptor of the softer graces in female forms as Praxiteles of Athens might reasonably have been supposed to have taken her as a model for his chisel had she been a contemporary Greek maiden, though the facial outlines of Velletri's Athene were, without actual resemblance, suggested by her features seen in profile.

Her brow had something of the dignified serenity of the Virgin of Foligno, though its patent of nobility might have been traced back through the line of her paternal ancestors. In her skin she had the finest inheritance of the beautiful woman; it might probably have been compared with that of Antinous. To the eye her hair was like the soft brown tints of autumn, with dashes of brightness in its mass; to the touch it was as soft as silkworms' floss, and when dressing it she was egotistical enough to succumb to the temptation of Narcissus, her mirror in place of the reflecting pool.

About her there was an atmosphere of poetry; she was pleased by the fairness of Nature, but since her return from Hastings the life of the country bored her, and she would willingly, at any moment, have sacrificed the beauties of the country, for the artificial pleasures of the town. In Nature colour and sunlight, being akin to gaiety, pleased her above form.

Her age was twenty-four, and, sometimes remembering

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this, she began to imagine herself old, and had fits of depression because, up to now, she had had no offer of marriage. Occasionally, when this mood was upon her, she would take a hand mirror and look for wrinkles and grey hairs. Marriage being the main object of her life, she shook her bonds in revolt from the thought of old age; she would have died now rather than come to that.

At these times she regarded her home life as one long imposition, and mists of melancholy descended upon her. Her lips would set in the determination to be free, and immediately she would rush into strange dreams—of romance, of ideal life, of action, colour, and gaiety. Then she would awaken to the real—sick, spiritless, and longing.

In time she realised that coming back to the village was like a banishment to her. It was only on her return home that she fully recognised that she had acquired romantic ideas in the atmosphere of novel reading that had been part of her existence during her residence at Hastings. These ideas she now fed fat in secret. Recollections of sunny days on the parades, of gay men and well-dressed women, were as plainly printed on her memory as an illumination on an achievement. The life she had left grew in importance by reason of contrast with the life she was now compelled to live. It was only now that she discovered what she had lost.

She still read books, and—foolish girl!—pondered on what she read. Her reading bred in her the desire to be a brilliant woman, meaning by brilliant one who could talk in flashes. She was not early successful in overpowering the lights of lesser wits, for when she flashed no one observed it.

In literature she loved fiction for its passionate stimulus. It gave knowledge and excited curiosity. She began to have suspicions of things she had never thought about, and read hurriedly on to solve her newly created inquisitiveness. In reading she found that she had a thirst to quench; the curiosity that ruined the original Eve was fully aroused. There were secrets to be disclosed that were worth the knowing. She would have applied to her mother to make them known had there not been a suspicion that there might be shame to one or both in having the knowledge revealed. She came to wonder why there should be mysteries of life that should be kept hidden from the young, and that, at the same time, should be hinted at in books; and she felt the need of a confidante whom she might closely question. In default of such a friend, and in pursuit of the mysteries that, to her,

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seemed unreasonably forbidden, she read on, and sought enlightenment from didactic works. Diligent and attentive reading in time divulged the knowledge she sought. Such readings were succeeded by long ponderings, the study of sociological and physiological writings, that gave her breadth of view, and created and stimulated opinions that were thus planted in her.

Charity's home, as an abode of noise and disorder, was utterly at variance with that spirit of refinement that was inherent in her. The regularity and harmony of her late uncle's little house was in full contrast to this. Her mother's anxious desire to be an economist, and her want of regularity in small domestic matters; her laments, her habit of always being at work and never completing, jarred her. She felt that she would have been better pleased if her parent had expended less time and energy on domestic trifles, and allowed herself some leisure in which to cultivate a few of the essentials of mental refinement. Her mother's lack of enquiry in this respect, and the absence of sympathy with her own love of books and knowledge were matters of everyday regret. Her father was a man of some information in regard to current events; and in the matter of tithes he had a never-failing topic of conversation.

On dull days this indoor life was intolerably grey; on days of sunshine it was depressing, for the sun's rays showed the shabbiness of the household furniture and the places where the carpet had worn to the thread. Sunlight, indeed, seemed to paint the family poverty in colours.

As time passed, the inherited spirit of Charity's ancestry began to sicken at the want and comfortless living of the family. She had pronounced longings for luxury and things beautiful; and reflecting at night in bed, she charged her parents with considerable responsibility for the levelling of the family. But for their many encumbering children there might be certain comfort and reasonable domestic luxury; even her father's extravagant ways were more easily condoned, for she could not bring herself to think that God desired abundant increase of children to result in indigence and wretchedness. There was no anger against her parents in these reflections, for she had reached that stage of moral maturity in which she could think of them with ample charity in this respect, and her regard for, and love of them, forbade anger; there was only reproachful thought at the loss of the family's right to moderate luxury and wealth.

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These constant reflections bred the thought of freedom, and a desire to experience the life of which her residence at Hastings had given her a mild foretaste. Could she break from home and support herself? was the ever-present thought. To go out into the world as a teacher or governess was out of the question: her lack of technical knowledge barred that outlet. Besides, she considered that marriage was, fundamentally, a matter of propinquity and opportunity; conditions far removed from the governess' mode of life. But she must go; and if nothing better was to be found she was determined to offer herself as an assistant in some tradesman's business. So thinking, she viewed herself standing on the edge of life with eager feet, and she raised a golden staircase up which fancy climbed. She began to draw mental plans of what she would do, and had visions of what she would see. Her heart leaped with hope, but sickened at the thought of the opposition she knew she must encounter when she disclosed her intention to her mother.

The opportunity for this occurred unexpectedly. One morning she was in the drawing-room, her hands engaged with a duster, her mind deep in dreams. Her mother entered.

"Here are some cast-off clothes of your father's, Charity. I want you to cut a suit out of them for Geoff. The poor boy has hardly a rag to his back, and you can make a good school suit of these. This room doesn't want dusting to-day."

Geoffrey was a five-year old brother, whose wrists showed long and red from the sleeves of an outgrown jacket. Charity looked up:

"Really, mother, I don't think I can make them."

She returned impetuously to her work, and sharply ran her duster down the keyboard of the sleeping piano, rousing the instrument to a long, tempestuous shriek.

Her mother was busy, and the girl's answer caused her momentary annoyance.

"Nonsense! If you can make your own dresses you can make a boy's suit. I'll help you with the coat. I want you to begin the work at once as the poor child is really badly off for clothes."

But the rude recall from the pleasures of fancy to the vulgarity of material things roused Charity's spirit of opposition:

"I can't do it, mother. I am sick of old clothes and worn carpets! Poverty, poverty, poverty! We have it with us all day long; it is hateful! I never forget it except when I

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sleep. I want to get away from it, mother, and I *will*! You must let me go into the world and earn my own living. I hate this humiliating poverty, and I hate the country!"

The girl spoke with feeling. She felt that the time had come when she could no longer accommodate herself to the present conditions of her everyday life: a monotony that seemed to be mentally stifling her.

Astonishment appeared in Mrs Woodhams's face, and she involuntarily allowed one of the garments she held to slip to the floor.

"What absurd ideas have you got hold of now, Charity? This all comes of so much novel-reading. If you did more needlework and less reading you would not have such absurd notions. Now then, put the duster down, and get my work-basket at once."

But the girl did not intend to allow the subject to be thus summarily dismissed. She pressed it further:

"I want to see the world, mother. I'm tired of being cooped up like a chicken intended for fattening. There is no society in the village; and here one has very little chance of being married."

Astonishment bound up words, and for relief Mrs Woodhams plumped into the nearest chair:

"Married, Charity! As soon as you are married your troubles begin."

"We are all born to take our share, mother. You have no troubles but those caused by the wants of your children."

Mrs Woodhams murmured: "My children!" Her thoughts went back to her many domestic anxieties on their account, and half-unconsciously she commented aloud upon them: "Yes, my children are the cause of all my worries—my children and poverty!"

Her eyes were in tears; pity came into the daughter's face.

"Yet now you would not be without one of them, mother."

The elder woman brightened: "No, not one."

Charity threw an affectionate arm around her parent's neck:

"Dear, noble little mother! You deprive yourself of comforts, and slave like a nigger woman for our sakes. You are the best mother on earth!"

Tears were coursing softly down the mother's face, which bore no present evidence of the rhythm and poetry of life. As she watched them Charity's thoughts went back a few years

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until they found the image of her mother as she used to be. She was pretty then, and glowing with health. Now she was but a shadow of the mother of those days. Perhaps she was shortening her life by her hard daily sacrifice. The girl's heart went sick at the thought.

Mrs Woodhams spoke again :

"This talk of marriage and going away comes of reading those rubbishy novels. I shall ask your father to bring you no more from the library. They always do harm."

Mrs Woodhams was so convinced that she had discovered the cause of her daughter's unsettled state of mind that she wiped her eyes almost briskly. But that her supply of books should be stopped seemed almost a calamity to Charity. Her answer was a defence :

"I am sure books haven't given me these desires, mother. I already had them, and books have only made them clearer and more definite."

"They have done you harm."

"They have broadened my mind."

"They have given you ideas of marriage and other things that you did not have before."

"Did you never wish to be married, mother ?"

"Of course, but——"

"Of course ! Then, of course, you must expect your children to have similar wishes. I have made up my mind that there is poor chance of marriage so long as I remain in this wretched village—unless I give myself away to a clod ! How would you like a daughter of yours—a Woodhams—to marry a soulless country clod ? Faith was wise when she left home. She never would have married had she remained here."

Mrs Woodhams now had nothing but pettiness to offer. Her interjection was intended to be slightly deprecatory :

"But Faith married a tradesman !"

The words brought red indignation to the girl's face. There was a spark of anger in her voice as she attacked them with fine scorn :

"A tradesman ! Yes, mother, a tradesman ; but he is rich, and Faith sees life and she is happy. I'd rather a thousand times marry a tradesman—although I come of the proud, poverty-stricken Woodhams !—than die an old maid in this miserable place. I dread being called old maid, mother ; the name is a byword. Look at the Viney girls. They are fairly good-looking, accomplished, sour girls, getting

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on in years. They fret for they know not what ; but what they fret for is marriage. They are shut up and never see men. If they went into the world, as Faith did, they would, at least, have a chance. Hundreds of girls' lives are ruined because they are not able to marry."

Her strong feelings on the subject gave her eloquence, and a warmth of colour had come into her face.

Her mother felt called upon to fill up the pause :

" You have some strange ideas, child. As for your leaving home, I tell you that I am against it. However, I will promise to talk the matter over with your father. Now get the scissors and begin to unpick the seams of this coat."

III

TRIFLES have decided destinies. A meeting of Charity Woodhams with Eunice French marked one. It was in the gloom of an autumn day that Charity was on her way home from Chichester, the wind piping around and bounding clouds through heaven. The walk to the farm was a good five-mile business, but the wheels of the girl's brain were in motion, and she did not heed the distance. Once she gave a momentary thought to a contrast of the Saturday bustle of the town she had just left with the desolate Sabbath peace of the country road, and shuddered. Her head still echoed the life and gaiety of the small country town where she had spent the afternoon : shops, people, the rolling of traffic, street cries, a band, and, later, lights. The scene had been a mild foretaste of the life she hoped for : the movement, the humanity she would mix with. It recalled delightful reminiscences of Hastings : the mild excitements she had sighed to leave at the end of her residence with her Uncle Ticehurst. But the Future ? with the joys of Hope ! Her heart leaped !

The clouds dragged skirts of rain. Fading light, neutral colour, stormy country, all tended to depression. She started a trot that rapidly reduced the mileage, but for breath relapsed into a quick-paced walk. The road mounted, and in conquering it she subdued heaviness of heart. Distance was pronounced by the bleating of sheep in a field : a pathetic chorus accompanied in the treble by the tinklings of their bells. Forward was a haystack standing out, tumulus-like, in despondent gloom, against an iron sky : the only high ex-crescence in the landscape.

Softer sounds were broken suddenly by aural evidence of violent weeping. Charity paused to ascertain its source, and beheld the figure of a woman in Magdalene posture. The road was lone, and Charity had reason for being startled. She drew a breath and went forward with a gentle word. There was no reply. She placed a hand, as gentle as her question, upon the shoulder of crouching Magdalene, and found her

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warm and of flesh. Again she courted words, but the stranger only gave a fresh passion of tears.

This exhibition of grief incarnate moved Charity's heart to pity; a Herod would have sympathised. The grim heavens may have been touched by this show of human misery for rain began to fall in drops like tears. The necessity of doing something was thus emphasised, and Charity gave the desolate figure a gentle shake.

"Leave me be!"

"But it is beginning to rain; if you stay here you'll get wet. Why, how's this?—you are wet already!"

Charity's exploring hand had come in contact with the girl's skirts, and found them wet as a laundrymaid's wash.

"Leave me be, please."

"But I can't leave you alone in a rain-storm. Come and help me to find a shelter. There should be a waggon-shed near here. Come along; I only wish to help you."

The figure rose slowly, as if undecided:-

"Oh, God, I wish I was dead, I do!"

"Nonsense, you must not talk like that! Come along! Can you run?"

Charity seized an arm and urged the woman forward, almost with physical force. The rain pricked their faces; evening had mothered night. Half-a-mile onward, in the thick of it, they saw the waggon-shed, end-on to the road. Charity pushed her companion in before her:

"It's rather dark; but there seems to be a cart here. You had better sit on the shafts. Dry your face with my handkerchief."

The Unknown was passive in obedience. Charity dried her own face, and went to the entrance. Presently she came back with a remark:

"It pours! It looks as if we sha'n't get away from here soon. Is your seat comfortable? I will fold my jacket into a cushion and you can sit on it. Why, you are shivering! Better have the jacket on."

She threw the garment over the woman's shoulders, talking the while:

"Listen!—the rain is worse. It is an abominable night. Darkness always depresses me. Have you a match?"

"No."

"There is one in my jacket pocket, and some cigarettes. No, don't move. I can get them. I always like to smoke

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when I am low. It soothes the nerves. Will you have a cigarette ? ”

The Unknown shook her head.

Charity lit a cigarette, puffed, held the burning match above the girl's head, and blew it out.

The stranger was a wide-bosomed, handsome young woman, but her features were deficient in life ; her face showed lack in vitality of blood and vigour of brain. She was probably a servant or a country woman. Charity asked her name.

The girl's voice came as a mere thread :

“ Eunice French.”

“ Are you from Hainaker ? ”

“ My mother lives there.”

“ Then I know your mother. She lives half-a-mile from our farm.”

The girl gave a lifeless “ Yes.”

“ And I remember you years ago, before I went to live with my uncle at Hastings.”

Eunice French seemed to have no remark to offer, and Charity continued to smoke in the interior silence. Then a thought came :

“ You have not told me how you got so wet.”

“ I ha' been trying to drown myself.”

Charity was startled, but she showed no sign of this in a calm and almost immediate pursuit of the conversation :

“ Why drown yourself ? Where ? ”

“ In the dick.”

“ In the ditch ! Why, it's only two or three feet deep ! ”

“ I should ha' laid down.”

“ But the water's cold ! I think it's silly of people to drown themselves in cold weather. If I wished to drown myself it should be in summer when the water was warm.”

“ You're a-laughing at me, miss ! ”

“ Indeed, I'm not ; I'm most serious ! Why did you wish to drown yourself ? ”

“ Mother wouldn't ha' me at home.”

“ Pooh ! What if she wouldn't ? I suppose she can't afford to keep you. That wouldn't trouble *me*. If I were you I'd get away from the village, and work for someone in the town, and enjoy myself.”

“ I did go to work for Mrs Tettmar at Chichester ; and then I come back, and—and mother says I'm a bad 'un.”

Charity's awakening mind suggested the girl's fault. She was circumlocutory in probing for the discovery :

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" Been stealing ?—anything belonging to Mrs Tettmar, I mean ? "

" No, miss."

" You don't drink, do you ? "

" I has a glass o' stout sometimes."

" It couldn't have been that. Why does your mother say you are a bad woman ? "

Misery began to weep afresh. Charity was having the devil's own bother to tap the girl to confess the reason of her trouble. She lit another cigarette, and glanced at her companion in the light of the flame. It was evident that Eunice French was in that condition which sometimes comes to women who follow the sin of Eve. Two puffs at the cigarette and Charity trod on the burning match ; it had served its purpose.

" You are in trouble, Eunice, and if you'll tell me all about it I may be able to help you."

" I dursn't."

There were more sobs.

" Come, it's foolish to give way. Tell me your story. Are you married ? "

A light vibration of their common seat was received by Charity's sense of feeling. It told of a shake of the head that conveyed the expected negative.

" Has he left you ? "

" Yes, miss."

" Beast ! "

" That he ain't, miss ! I wun't ha' him named ! "

" He's no true man to run away."

" He's gone fur a sojer."

" Then we'll have him brought back. Now tell me why he deserted you."

Charity had to tolerate a preface of tears before the girl came to her story. She got it at last, in sentences with frequent lachrymose punctuations. While in domestic service at Chichester, Eunice French had been courted by one Alfred Mephram, a builder's man, had left her servitude under compulsion of his persuasions and gone to live with him. She had loved the man, she said, and still loved him. A week ago he had failed to come home to the room they occupied together in the cottage of a labourer and his wife. She had sought him, and learned from a work-mate that Mephram had been sacked from his job for drunkenness, and had then declared his intention of enlisting. She had despatched to the

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barracks, only to learn from the orderly-room sergeant that the battalion had left for the railway station a half-hour before, under an order to proceed to Aldershot for a month's training previous to being drafted to a foreign station. Eunice had posted to the railway, and found the regiment standing at ease during the preliminaries of entraining. Her difficulty then had been to discover her lover among the seven or eight hundred men leaning on their rifles. Up and down the ranks she walked, examination of individual faces being difficult through the heavy curtain of her tears. "Can ye tell me where be my Alf Mephram?" was her inquiry of rank and file alike, but shaken heads and rough, good-humoured jokes, in easy, barrack-room phrase, were all she gathered for her pains, until one good-natured corporal, with more practical aid than that of his companions, suggested the company of recruits at the rear of the battalion. There she had found her deserter.

"An' he jest did look han'som, miss, in his red clöathes!"

Laughter and pathos are ill-assorted twins, that generally go together hand in hand. Charity smiled in the curtaining darkness:

"And what did you do then?"

She had clung to her man as he stood in the ranks, begging him to return home with her. Sullen after drink, he said it "warn't no good, he had had enough of it." She was not to be a fool, he would write to her from Aldershot, and send her money to come and see him. She knew he would not, and clung with tighter grip. The command came for attention; she remained in the ranks until they pushed her away. The battalion entrained, she entered his compartment, and a sergeant pulled her out and slammed the door. The guard's whistle blew shrill, the train moved, she ran with it a dozen paces, and, as it gained speed, she sank to the platform in a half-swoon. Her Alf had his head out of window, and she saw him toss something towards her. It rolled near her—a half-sovereign. She picked it up, rose to her feet with mounting blood and flung it after the disappearing train with a "damn!"

"And then you went home, I suppose?"

A ticket-collector had apprehended her for throwing a missile at the train, but he allowed her to depart almost immediately. She had returned to her lodging with an unsatisfactory tale for her landlady's ears, and many tears to be shed. The woman saw that there was little prospect of more rent: Eunice French must go. She left with a bundle for her mother's cottage.

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"And what did your mother say to you?"

There was another flood as Eunice told how her mother had declaimed against the family disgrace, and refused to give her shelter. The girl had left the cottage to return to Chichester, overborne by her pack of misery. The view of a roadside ditch had prompted her to oblivion. Spontaneity was sobered at the touch of cold water, and the woman had dragged herself from the ditch to lie in tears by the roadside.

"I tell you what—I'll see your mother. If you love your Alf Mephram there may be no great harm in what you have done. The wickedness lies with him."

"But mother says I'm a bad un, an' she'll ha' naun do wid me."

"Your mother is like most mothers: she is wanting in the proper knowledge of human nature. Knowledge and breadth of mind are required to forgive such mistakes as yours. Ignorance and narrowness will never condone it. Do you understand me?"

"No, miss."

"Never mind, it is not necessary. Would you live with your Alf Mephram again if he came back to you?"

"Yes, miss."

"Would you marry him?"

"He says as how he wun't marry."

"And if you were in a home or in service you would leave and go to live with him again if he came back?—I mean to say you would not think it wicked to live with him again without being married?"

"Oh, miss, 'tis so hard to be good, and all women can't be married! I'd rather have been wicked like this than not have had my Alf."

The thought of her man fetched up tears.

"Then you'd go back to him?"

"Yes, miss."

"You have pluck!"

"Oh, miss, he loves me as I love him, I be sure! He've only gone off in the tantrums all-thro'-along-on-account o' losing his job. When he wants to come back he wun't be able to."

"You have a better opinion of him than I have. Well, it's no good resigning yourself to misery, as you seemed to have done when I found you. Resignation is fool's courage; show a bold face to fortune!"

Yet so far as she could see Charity viewed the girl's future as a dismal prospect.

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“ But I ain’t got no money, miss ; and soon I sha’n’t be able to do no work. Everybody is agen me. People is cruel an’ unfair, miss. It comes hard on a poor woman who makes a mistake, but nobody says naun to the man. The men takes up with us, an’ then turn roun’ an’ names us for it. ’Tain’t fair, by no manner o’ means ! ”

The woman snatched at a breath.

“ Listen to me, Eunice. You may have done wrong—I won’t say what I think about that—but your Alf Mephram is the real sinner. He’s enlisted, and there may be no getting him out of the army before his time is up. What you have to do now is to make up your mind to face the world, and when your trouble is over you must seek work—needlework, or some sort of sewing you might do. I’ll help you till then. I can’t do much because I’m poor—almost as poor as you are, but I have a few sovereigns, and I can sell some of my things—that is, if your mother won’t take you in. I’ll get my mother to go and see her, or I’ll see her myself. You must come back to the village with me, and I’ll get you a room for to-night at the inn. The rain’s worse than ever ; it’s no use staying here any longer—let me help you to put on my jacket. No ; you are still shivering, and I insist upon your wearing it. You must have something hot—whisky or rum ; I think rum is best.”

Charity assisted the girl to button the jacket, then impulsively kissed her.

“ Oh, miss ! ”

“ What, crying again ?—and because I kissed you ! How absurd you are ! Now come ; we must walk quickly.”

They went out into the night and its arrows of piercing rain. They stumbled on, arm enchained, through a world that seemed clad in crape, clouded by the wind ; damped, wetted, soaked by the rain, until their clinging skirts marked the shape of their lower limbs : through all stages to complete soddening ; fighting for breath, pace, shelter.

A solitary light forward was their first encouragement : they were near to the village. Lights multiplied, almost extravagantly ; their stepping was braver ; and Charity’s kiss was burning on a grateful outcast’s cheek.

The village was won ; so was the inn. The two entered a small parlour with sawdusted floor, the water from their clothes dripping to form pools. Charity secured hot rum, supper, and lodging for her companion, and left with the promise of an early visit on the morrow.

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IV

SLEEP was not to be won by Charity that night. She was in a chaos of thought. She had taken Eunice French's haunting story to bed with her, to discover that it had advanced a crisis in her own life. Her mind ran riot. Mental effort at last induced order in her brain, and she fell to reflection. The empty female heart, not to be compensated by gifts other than love, must attach itself somewhere. That was a natural law. Obedience of that law led to suffering, and the world was a huge caravansary of human woes, in which Eunice French was but a unit. If she herself left home she would probably invite a courtship by suffering; she might become another unit among the women martyrs. Yet it was her only means of escape from the continual dwelling with commonplaces that she foresaw as her lot if she remained to draw out her existence in the village. She must choose that, or take a flight towards the unknown; and she chose to fly.

Marriage—honourable marriage—was her desire. When so many of her sex lived on nothing more substantial than the hope of it, and never would, she must seek it, assiduously, with the help of such natural gifts as she possessed. She shrank from the state of women martyred to lifelong spinsterhood. Within the bounds of decency she would fight against that. Her chance she wanted—only her chance. That was her yearning as she lay in bed like a tombstone effigy, under the burden of darkness. There were fears, but she put them to instantaneous flight. Pale dawn saw her pale, but, heartened by resolution, she descended to the common room.

Her mother noticed her wanness. Charity said she had a headache, she had not slept. Mrs Woodhams thought that she might have taken cold in the previous night's rain, and prescribed her infallible medicine for the minor physical ills: hot tea.

The girl drank the tea, and trifled with the buttered bread. Breakfast came to an end, and when her father had gone to the farm, and the children had been urged to school, she told her mother that she would like to speak with her.

Mrs Woodhams imagined the scent of a return to the subject of her daughter's desire to leave home. She set her lips,

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in the manner that was common to both mother and daughter, when each expected a call for the use of determination. Then she spoke :

"Very well, Charity ; we can talk while we make the beds."

They ascended to the upper floor, and proceeded to their work in silence. Her mother seemed determined not to be the first to speak, and at length Charity brought herself to break the lull :

"Mother, I want you to do something for me."

Mrs Woodhams had not expected the request of a favour, and, in mild surprise, momentarily she suspended operations on the bed.

"Yes ?"

"As I was coming home from Chichester last night I came across a woman weeping bitterly in the rain. I went to her and found her in serious trouble—through a man, mother. She had attempted to drown herself, but lacked courage when she was in the water. She was wet through ; it was thus I found her. We sought shelter in a waggon-shed, and there she told me a cruel story of deception on the part of the man—one Alfred Mephram, who deserted her after getting her into trouble. The woman at her lodgings has turned her out of doors, and her own mother will not have her at home."

Charity paused.

"Well ?"

"She is Eunice French, the daughter of Mrs French at Dann's Farm. I promised to help her, and I want you to go and see Mrs French and persuade her to have her daughter back—at least until her trouble is over. You will, won't you, mother dear ?"

Mrs Woodhams's face settled into petrified severity, and her lips met in a firm, straight line. Operations on the bed were emphasised.

"Will you, mother ?"

"You ask me to plead for an immoral woman."

Indignation scorched the daughter's face :

"Immoral ! Why is she immoral ? Because her child will be illegitimate ; and because morals are manners, and men make them ! She wished to marry—the man promised her marriage ! She fell—according to the common idea she has fallen—and he—coward !—left her. He shared the sin, but she takes all the punishment. And you blame her for her ignorance of the ways of men. Perhaps if her mother had

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warned her she would not have fallen. Parents tell their children too little ; they leave them to find out too much ! ”

Once more Mrs Woodhams's lips took the form of a bloodless cut.

“ I am sorry for her, Charity ; but there is no help for her. She must pay for her sin. ”

“ Yes ; it is easy to pity the sinner and condemn the sin. You can talk like that, mother—you who are lawfully married ! Poor Eunice was like the rest of us : she desired marriage. She had heart-hunger, as you had when you married my father. All the forces of her nature urged her to fulfil her mission in life ; but because she has not done so in just the way society lays down, you would curse her, and cast her off, and call her lost ! She gave way to the God-given instinct that is older than the social law that condemns it. Which is wrong, nature or society ? Who is right, God or man ? ”

Mrs Woodhams was shocked, but instinctively she felt compelled to make some sort of reply. The words came feebly :

“ I am very sorry for her. ”

The girl thought it an opportunity for pleading, and her voice took a slight note of plaintiveness :

“ Oh, mother, can nothing be done for this poor woman and her child ? Is she to be wrecked, without an effort made to save her, just because public opinion is so cruel ? ”

“ I can do nothing, Charity. People would say I condoned her wrong-doing. ”

Charity's face was stained with indignation :

“ What if she were your own daughter, mother ? Would you turn her from your door to infest the streets ? My mother would not do that, I am sure ! ”

The girl's last words struck her mother as a tone of appeal. The point told. Mrs Woodhams paused, struggled mentally a moment, then spoke :

“ My daughter would never commit so abominable a sin. ”

“ You never know, mother ! ”

“ Charity ! ”

“ I say you never know, mother. Perhaps Eunice French's mother thought the same of her own daughter before she left home as you think of yours. ”

“ And now that she has fallen her mother will have nothing to do with her. ”

“ Then she is a bad, wicked woman ! ” Charity spoke vehemently. “ I shall go to see her myself, and tell her so if she will not listen to reason. ”

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The suggestion immediately alarmed Mrs Woodhams :

" I shall be very angry with you if you do, Charity ; and so will your father."

" Then my father is not the kind man I take him for. You may show your disapproval, mother, if you think fit, but I shall go."

She turned to leave the room, hesitated at the door, and came back :

" This has decided me on taking the course I spoke to you of a month ago, mother. I am going to leave home."

" You will be a very foolish girl if you do, Charity. I thought you had given up that silly idea."

There was a step on the stairs, the doorway yawned, and the farmer entered the room. His wife perceived him with a sigh that spoke of relief from mental tension. Her first remark to him assured this :

" I'm glad you've come in, John. I've wasted nearly all my morning in listening to a story Charity has been telling me about Mrs French's girl getting into a bother with a man. She wants me to go and see Mrs French about her ; and she has got an idea into her head that it will be better for her if she leaves home. I wish you'd exercise your authority as her father, and tell her to put such rubbish out of her mind. I've got such a headache, through talking and listening to her, that I hardly know what I'm doing ! "

The farmer took a step towards his daughter and looked into her eyes :

" What's this I hear, my girl ? "

" It's quite right what mother says, father."

" But what would you do if you left us ? Where would you live ? "

" I'd go into a shop, father."

" You, a Woodhams, go into a shop ! "

" Yes, indeed ; other ladies have done that."

" Um ! "

The farmer's reflectory exclamation was unsatisfactory to his wife :

" It's no good hum-ing and ha-ing about it, John ! She can't go ; you know she can't ! Look at the temptations ! "

The farmer spoke :

" If the girl's mind's set on it, I see no objection. She won't be away long ; a month will sicken her."

" John, you must be mad ! "

" If her mind's made up it's no good wishing to keep her

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here. I said as much when you told me of this the other week. Let her go, wife ; and, mark my words—I give her a month."

The day was against Mrs Woodhams, and she sought comfort for defeat in the relief of tears. Her husband gazed at her a moment :

"No good weeping, Maria. A month ! I'll go downstairs and have my glass of beer. I've sold the old bay cob this morning."

When he closed the door Charity's arms encircled her mother's neck.

"Cheer up, little mother ! When I'm away there will be one less to provide for. Besides, I shall be able to help you."

Her mother's reply was a smothered sob.

Charity's call on Eunice French was later than she had anticipated. The landlord's wife met her on the threshold of the inn :

"Had I knowed what sort o' person she were you brought here last night, miss, I would not ha' took her in. My house is a respectable one, and always has been. I wun't ha' no bad characters here."

"I'm sorry if you think you have cause to regret anything, Mrs Finch ; but you know that by law you are compelled to give shelter to those who are willing to pay for it."

"That may be, or it mayn't, miss ; but there ain't no law to make me give board and bed to bad characters. I see'd how 'twas with her with me own eyes, and when I asked her who her husband was she just begins to cry, and I know'd what that meant."

"Please tell Eunice French that I wish to see her ; and if you'll bring your bill I'll pay you what she owes."

Eunice came forward with frightened eyes. Charity took her out into the sunshine, and, speaking encouragingly, bade her wait near her mother's house during the time she proposed to interview her.

She experienced the labour of the logician converting inconsequent minds in persuading Mrs French to an exhibition of compassion for her own erring child ; nor would her eloquence have availed had she not promised to pay for the girl's food when the mother, as a last argument against yielding, pleaded her poverty. Disgusted with this show of inhumanity Charity fetched Eunice to the cottage door, and receiving the girl's grateful thanks, and giving promises of the continuance of her interest in her, left her, trembling, in her mother's presence.

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V

MESSRS MASON BROTHERS, SONS, AND COMPANY, silk mercers, costumiers, outfitters, and linendrapers, of Brighton, were accounted one of the best firms of their kind on the South Coast. A royal coat-of-arms, spread-eagled above the main entrance of their building, added dignity to the appearance of the establishment's prosperity, and claimed the patronage of *ton*, a word that the senior partner sounded sonorously whenever he had occasion to speak of the dignity of Drapery among the trades. *Ton* in trade was the level lived up to by Mr Septimus Mason; and in keeping to this level he kept himself to his counting house, only descending among his assistants during the hours of customers' absence. The true reason was that Mr Septimus Mason was above the ambitions of the counter. He spoke languages, had travelled, had, in salad days, aspired to a profession, and never, in business hours, wore a frock-coat. In times of depression Septimus, seventh son of Richard Mason, deceased, had, willy-nilly, been condemned by his father to Drapery for life, the parent adding a rider to the sentence to the effect that education sometimes fostered ambition to the detriment of commercialism. If Septimus aspired to be a gentleman, he might be a highly commercial one. A highly commercial gentleman Septimus became; uxorious, great among Drapers, and the owner of a mansion, a brougham and a butler.

To the drapery establishment of Messrs Mason Brothers, Sons, and Company came Charity Woodhams one spring afternoon. A searching of the advertisement columns of newspapers had proved unprofitable, and decided the girl to adventure a personal canvass. Brighton was chosen as a town offering maximum chances, and life out of business hours. She left her box at the railway-station cloak-room, and took an exploring walk.

Drapers' shops in side streets were ignored. She shuddered at the thought of handling inferior fabrics and servants' prints. Something three farthings a yard spelt cheap, and cheap Charity associated with shoddy, intimate dealings with which meant, in her estimation, a lowering of self-respect. The

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offer of her services at the first shop of pleasing appearance had met with a polite refusal, and wandering onward she was drawn to the entrance of Messrs Masons' premises by the *ton* of the display in large sheet-glass windows, and the allurement of Royal Arms. A commissionaire opened the door. She entered with a customer's confidence and requested to see the proprietor. A majestic shopwalker asked if he might send in her name.

"Please say a lady has called. I wish to see him on business."

"Very good, madam."

He beckoned an apprentice and sent the message to Mr Mason's private office. Charity was offered a chair.

Under the curious eye of the shopwalker her dignity was sitting in state, and she posed regal, like Queen Esther. New customers were not in the habit of demanding interviews with the head of the firm before opening an account. Such an uncommon request from a strange lady offered speculation, and eyes of surrounding assistants questioned the nature of her business.

The youth returned and requested her to follow him upstairs.

She entered a small office, and observed a gentleman of military bearing, a waxed moustache, and faultless clothes, seated at a desk. Mr Mason, dictating letters to a clerk, rose as she passed through the door.

"Good-morning. May I speak with you privately, please?"

He signed to the clerk to withdraw, and brought Charity his own chair.

"I have come to ask you if you can give me a position as an assistant in your firm?"

Annoyance, as a cloud, floated across Mr Mason's face. His sentences of reply were short and clipped of deference:

"No, I think not; we have no vacancy—I am very busy; my clerk is my confidential man; I thought you wished to see me privately."

He rang a table bell sharply to call the clerk back. Charity's face took fire and she rose as she spoke:

"Excuse me, I did wish to see you privately. I'm sorry if I've caused you annoyance. Salary is not the main object with me; perhaps you might think of something."

He looked from a letter and regarded her attentively.

"I've no knowledge of you, Miss——"

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"Woodhams is my name."

"—Miss Woodhams. It is not our practice to engage assistants without satisfactory credentials."

"I can give them."

He paused; thoughtful eyes were bent upon her figure.

"Have you had previous experience?"

"No; that is why I am willing to accept a nominal salary in addition to my board and lodging."

"Would you care to be a model in our mantle department? You are tall and have a good figure."

"I should like nothing better."

"The salary would be only twelve pounds a year to commence. I might have offered more if you had served an apprenticeship."

"That will suit me."

"Very well, I will see what can be done. Leave me the names of your references."

She gave him names at Halnaker; and telling her to call in two or three days he wished her good-morning.

As she was at the door her departure was arrested by his voice. He had watched her walk.

"Er—excuse me, Miss Woodhams: I don't wish to be rude, but—are you a lady?"

Surprised, she turned, her face a-flower:

"Yes; I've always been considered one."

"I mean are you a lady by birth?"

"I am well connected, and come of an old county stock."

"Good! We have other ladies here. We like to keep up the reputation of the house: high-class goods well served, but no pride. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Well, the point is one in your favour. I've no doubt you've satisfactory reasons for wishing to go into business—poverty, perhaps? At anyrate it is no affair of mine. Even Society ladies are not ashamed of making money by business nowadays; so there is nothing to be ashamed of."

"I am not ashamed."

"No? Well, call again at ten o'clock on Thursday, please. Good-morning."

A moderate lodging being secured, Brighton gave Charity three days' pleasure, reminiscent of the old life at Hastings, only this was busier, brighter, gayer. She was in a world of wonder. The movement, bustle, and gaiety of the restless

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actors passing and repassing before the dead background of terraces, and squares of houses that had reached dowagerism, was the blood of that pleasure which she looked upon as the joy of life : and she might have symbolised a modern Euphrosyne piping l'allegro in Vanity Fair.

Sight of the sea gave a promise of sport in its waters if she entered Masons', and her nostrils expanded to smell brine. She ventured for the first time to the pit of a theatre, and there saw in the concrete scenes that had moved her in the pages of fiction. She came away with a conviction of the superiority of the stage to the novel as a manner of presenting life. In the evening she wrote enthusiastically of Brighton to her mother, and the buoyancy of her hope in the future was apparent in the lines of her letter.

She was at her appointment with Mr Mason to the minute of the hour. This time, with the knowledge of her business, he kept her waiting, and, under annoyance of questioning eyes, she began to fume internally, until she received the summons to his office. She entered, and stood until he looked up from his desk. He was business-like, at the point immediately :

"Your credentials are satisfactory, Miss Woodhams. I have spoken about you to Miss Spinnet, who is our buyer in the mantle department. Mr Lever will take you to her at once. We have rules in this house, and I must ask you to make it your business to become acquainted with them as soon as may be. Your orders will come from Miss Spinnet, and you must refer to her in all matters of business. We pay salaries monthly."

Charity gave him brief thanks, and turned to follow the clerk upstairs to the second floor.

Miss Spinnet was of the age that never advances. Tall, and of a figure artificially sculptured to showroom requirements, she had achieved a carriage most admirable in the eyes of lady customers. That was all in favour of her appearance ; and thus she struck Charity. At Mr Lever's introduction she extended her hand :

"I am pleased to meet you, Miss Woodhams. I hope we shall get on well together."

"Thank you. I hope so, too."

"This is Miss Cole, who assists in this department."

Miss Spinnet indicated a milk-faced girl with a figure in training for showroom demands. Charity advanced her hand.

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The department was free of customers ; and Miss Spinnet gave her novice instructions to dust a row of jackets.

"Have you brought your box ?"

"No ; it is at my lodging."

"You had better send for it at dinner-time ; if you have any business to settle with your landlady you can see her this evening. We have half-an-hour for dinner, but to-day you may take an hour and put your things in order. Miss Cole will help you. On Tuesday we dress the window, and you will be expected to help Mr Seldon."

Charity was kept fully occupied all the morning. Jenny Cole admitted her to the secret of the firm's private price marks : a combination of letters ticketed to goods. Customers came, and Charity was advised to be near while Miss Spinnet interviewed them, with the intention that she should absorb something of the tactics of the clever saleswoman. A subtle flattery and innuendo seemed to play an important part in these modes of operation. "To persuade a customer to buy what she really does not want is perfection in a saleswoman," said Miss Spinnet.

At one o'clock Miss Spinnet went to dinner, leaving Charity and Jenny Cole together. Having the room to themselves Miss Cole advanced to her new friend :

"We may as well sit down now and talk. Nobody comes in between one o'clock and three, except sometimes an old lady who wants to beat down prices, and who doesn't want other customers to hear her. We go down to dinner with the second party. Are you hungry ?"

"Not very."

"They feed you well here. We have cold stuff to-day : beef or mutton, and hot pudding. To-morrow we shall have hot joints and bread and cheese for second course."

"I don't mind what it is so long as the plates and table-cloth are clean."

"Oh, they're clean enough, but a bit rough. Chrimes—he's the commissionaire—and a woman wait at table. His wife does the cooking. Have you looked over the shop ?"

"No ; but I saw a little when I came this morning. It seems to be a high-class business. What do the shop people keep calling 'side' to that bald-headed gentleman for ? I heard them when I was waiting to see Mr Mason."

Miss Cole laughed.

"You are really too funny ! The bald-headed gentleman in the frock-coat is the head shopwalker. The assistants

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call 'Sign' when they wish him to initial the bills of purchase before they are sent to the cashier's desk."

"I never could make it out. I used to think that 'side' was an insult to the personal dignity of those walking gentlemen, and wondered why they put up with it."

"Oh no: the head shopwalker is a gentleman always to be treated with respect; you have to call him 'sir.' Rudeness to him from an assistant would cost her dear. The shopwalker is a little god, I can tell you!"

"I'll approach him with due reverence, then."

"Yes; but flirting is not allowed. A girl was dismissed for it last month."

"I don't flirt."

"Perhaps you have got somebody to think about?"

"Not the somebody you mean. You have, I see."

Charity was looking at the ring of sky-blue stones, which Miss Cole had slipped secretly on the third finger of her left hand as Miss Spinnet left the showroom.

"Yes; he is Mr Seldon, the assistant shopwalker. I only wear it in private, and when I am out. I keep it in my purse at other times, as I don't want to raise Miss Spinnet's suspicions."

"You are not afraid that she might be jealous?"

"Most old maids are."

"Not without reason. You have never heard them say they kept single from choice—or if they did it was only because of the bitterness of pride that kept them from showing their hearts. How can a woman desire to go against her natural instincts? You are lucky to have a lover. You must introduce him to me."

"I will with pleasure; but you'll not give us away?"

"Oh dear no; I wish you no harm."

Miss Spinnet returned to the showroom at half-past one, and the two girls went downstairs to dinner.

The long dining-hall was filled with the flowing of tongues. To Charity it was the clatter of her home table multiplied. Young men and women were already seated when the two girls entered, and some had begun to eat. Miss Cole put her hand on Charity's arm:

"That's him!"

"Who's 'him'?"

"Fred—Mr Seldon. He generally manages to sit next to me. I sent him a note this morning to keep two chairs to-day."

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" Oh, that is he ! "

Mr Seldon was a frock-coated young man with heavy cheeks, and the pathway of a parting down the exact centre of his head. Charity thought him pleasant-looking, but her opinion was somewhat modified when, on being presented to her by blushing Jenny Cole, he smiled and revealed broken teeth in his upper jaw.

" Hope you'll like this place, Miss Woodhams."

" I think I shall."

" Do you take potatoes ? You'd better help yourself now or you won't get the chance when the dish has gone down the table."

Miss Cole sat between her lover and Charity. Everybody was eating rapidly ; and Jenny was almost entirely excluded from the conversation by Mr Seldon, who passed most of his remarks across her to Charity. The neglected girl was quick to notice this, and adopted an unobserved sulky humour. After dinner, as they were moving from the room, Charity a little in advance, Mr Seldon whispered to Jenny :

" I like your friend, Jen—she's pretty."

Jenny raised her chin, bared her humour, and, without replying, joined Charity. Mr Seldon shrugged, and muttered under his breath :

" Jealousy ! "

VI

MISS COLE was most anxious to have a favourable opinion of Mr Seldon from her new friend. Her patience declined to wait long, and she put the question almost as soon as she and Charity were alone together :

"What do you think of him ?"

"He's very nice—not quite my style, though."

"He admires you."

To Charity's ear Jenny's tone contained a faintly, suspicious tang of jealousy.

"I don't object to be admired ; and I'm a perfectly safe person to admire. I'm not the sort to fall in love with every man who makes sheep's eyes at me."

To Jenny this seemed a slight aspersion cast at her lover ; she was armed immediately to defend him :

"Oh, I'm sure Fred would never *think* of doing such a thing !"

"I'm sure he wouldn't when one considers that he is well provided for already."

"Well, we have been engaged three months ; but Fred is weak, and new faces attract him."

"You need have no fear of me."

"Oh, I haven't the least ! I'm not jealous, you know—not the slightest bit !"

"Of course you are not !"

In the interval specially allowed her to-day Charity was enabled to learn much of the personalities in her new surroundings from the running tongue of Miss Cole ; and in the process much of that estimable young lady herself. From this point Jenny was tempted to branch off into the history of her own family and their fortunes. In making her estimate of her new friend Charity was quick to discover that her life was lived for the day when she could call herself Mrs Seldon. Her friends, her family, Masons, the whole world were trivialities weighed against the glamour of that stupendous event.

The hum of the morning became a buzz of business in the afternoon, and Charity was kept running from one department

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to another until her back and legs ached and her cheeks burned with the unaccustomed exercise. Business was at a gallopade, up and down and round; the buzz of voices and click of cash balls, as they rattled to and from the cashier's desk, for music. Hurry, hurry, there was no time to stop and breathe: the excitement was exhilarating as mountain air after the climb. The dance in the shop, the dance in the ball-room: the one, now first experienced, seemed good as the other, still unknown to Charity, newly come into a world that, till now, had been viewed only in her imagination.

On Tuesday morning she was instructed to assist Mr Seldon and Miss Cole in dressing a window. "Style" in arrangement, "scheme" in colour, were the effects to be aimed at, and weekly change in both to retain customers' interest. "We employ London 'dressers,'" declared the firm; and ladies had shadowy visions of visits from experts who devoted their time to window dressing at high fees, at such hours as allowed the shop blinds to be drawn in daylight.

Mr Seldon thought Charity endowed with the artistic taste.

"You are to take Jenny's—Miss Cole's place as my assistant as soon as you have got into our way of arranging things. Miss Spinnet wishes her to remain in the showroom on dressing days, as she requires assistance when there is a rush of customers."

Miss Cole's eyes gleamed the yellow light as she heard the remark.

"I think that it would be much better for Miss Woodhams to remain in the showroom; she has a better figure for trying on than I have."

"But Miss Spinnet says that you are the more experienced saleswoman, dear."

To Charity it was clear that Jenny's preference was due to suspicion. She suggested a conclusion:

"If it makes no difference, Mr Seldon, I'd rather remain in the showroom while you and Miss Cole are dressing the window. I'm sure that her taste in window dressing is as much more cultivated as it is more experienced than mine, or than mine ever will be."

"It does make a difference, Miss Woodhams. Mr Mason's instructions are that the most experienced saleswomen shall wait upon customers if the seniors of their departments are engaged. Besides, the juniors always help the shop-walkers to dress the windows."

Charity telegraphed a glance to Jenny signifying that she

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had done her best. Miss Cole's lower lip was in the grip of her teeth, and jealousy showed red in her face. She left the window.

Charity took the first opportunity of soothing her :

"I hope you don't think, Jenny, that it is my wish to help Mr Seldon in the window dressing ; I'd much rather assist Miss Spinnet while you and he are doing the work."

A sudden generosity of tone was evident in Miss Cole's reply :

"I'm sure you would, Charity. It's not you that I'm afraid of ; it's him."

"He you should say. Do you know, I think that you, as an engaged girl, should be above petty feelings of this kind. I think if I were engaged I should have too great a feeling of satisfaction in myself to allow my mind to dwell on less worthy feelings. If you can't trust Mr Seldon you can surely trust me."

"Yes, I believe I can—I'm sure I can ! But he is so weak he will always run after a girl with a pretty face. I've had to put up with this kind of thing before."

"But you must see that I don't care a straw for him, and if the attempts at flirting are all on one side I'm sure that he will make very little progress. Besides, I think he is really very much attached to you, and if you wish to cure his 'weakness,' as you call it, the best thing is to appear indifferent. If you show him that you are jealous you will only make him vain of his own powers. Try a little manœuvring. To tell you the truth, I think that you are just a *little* too good for him ; and if you can impress him with that idea, without actually telling him so, it will probably go far in working a cure."

Whether she believed it or not Miss Cole agreed with all her friend said. In point of fact she was an example of the order of women with whom it is absurd to argue, for she followed her feelings rather than her reason. Women of fixed ideas are impregnable to logic, and the reasoner, looking for a victory, is apt to find only a phasma.

Charity looked forward to the next week's process of window dressing with no little apprehension. Mr Seldon was uniformly polite to her during those occasions on which she encountered him in the course of her duties. The better to allay Jenny Cole's fears she made a point of sitting at the opposite side of the table during meals, and although she frequently observed Mr Seldon's gaze fixed on her, and sometimes even fancied that she detected a badly disguised smile

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on his face, she made a point of controlling the play of her features so well that he was unable to gather whether or no she was conscious of his attitude towards her.

On the Tuesday morning she did not appear to assist him in the window display until he sent for her. In allowing this she had a faint hope that she might be overlooked, and Miss Cole requisitioned as usual. When she received his summons in Jenny Cole's presence she had the satisfaction of knowing that her friend had seen that she had done her best to escape the duty, and thus she felt that she went to the work with Jenny's confidence in her to resist any advances that might be made by Mr Seldon. He received her with a question :

"Had you forgotten that this is window-dressing day, Miss Woodhams ?"

"Oh no ; I only thought that, after all, you might have decided to ask Jenny to help. It would have been natural, you know."

By her remark she wished to suggest to him the idea that, personally, she had no particular desire to be in his presence. His answer conveyed no impression of what his ulterior intentions towards herself, if he had any, might be :

"It is Mr Mason's wish that you should assist. I have to carry out orders. This morning I think that you might do the dressing while I hand you the goods. Shall I help you into the window ?"

"No, thanks. I'm afraid that I shall betray your confidence in my capabilities, but I shall do my best to make an attractive display."

"I shall help you, of course."

He collected half-a-dozen cloaks, capes, and jackets, and placed them at the opening of the window, and then, entering the recess, proceeded to hand the goods to Charity, who found her retreat barred by reason of his presence at the only exit.

The work of dressing proceeded in the usual manner, Charity, as it advanced, occasionally raising the drawn blind, while her companion, in his shirt sleeves, went outside the shop to observe the effect of her efforts from the exterior. Returning, after one of these exits, he found her on her knees arranging the folds of a mantle. Her back was to him, and the nape of her neck was stretched bare above the collar of her dress by reason of the lowered position of her head. With a sudden impulse he stooped down to her, as if—but at his movement she raised her face, crimson with the exertion, the impulse vanished and, in an endeavour to cover his movement,

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he attempted to improve the position of the folds of the mantle which she had been engaged in arranging :

"I could not have done it better myself, Miss Woodhams."

"I'm glad you are satisfied, though your action in altering my folds somewhat contradicts your statement ; doesn't it ?"

"Not at all. I was merely trying to improve, but I find your way better. See, I have altered it back again."

He was unable to decide whether she had noticed his action or not, and he reflected on this while continuing his work, pondering on a manner of renewing the assault. If, he decided, she had been awake to his movement, she was evidently not a girl to submit to a rough and palpable style of attack. Her ice-coating of almost indefinable reserve would have to be thawed, and how to bring about the dissolution was the point for consideration. Judging by certain airs of her manner, he at length concluded that a subtle and insinuating flattery might prove a heat of sufficient ardour to accomplish his purpose.

His plan of procedure was decided, therefore, upon more tactical lines. During the few ensuing days he prepared the way for onslaught by a polite attention to her that was utterly alien to his usual manner of dealing with his female subordinates. This coaxing game, while not lost on those around, was acceptable to Charity, inasmuch as it pleased her vanity. Though not actually seeking his presence on those occasions when chance threw her into his neighbourhood she received his plan of procedure without suspecting the point to which it led. Towards this he made such excellent insidious progress that, in a moment of impetuous confidence, Charity was pleased to congratulate Jenny Cole on the almost perfect manners and gentlemanly breeding exhibited by her lover, and to add that she was most favourably impressed with him on that account.

Poor Jenny Cole, in fear for her own love, said that she hoped Mr Seldon had not been making advances.

Charity was slightly indignant :

"Really, Jenny, your unwarrantable jealousy is utterly beyond my powers of comprehension ! Mr Seldon has been nothing but a perfect gentleman ; and as for flirting, I really think that you have given him an undeserved character. I don't intend to flirt with him, as I have told you before ; but there can be no harm in my liking an agreeable man ; even you—who are engaged to be married to him—cannot object to that."

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"I only know what I have seen and heard."

"Heard! I should like to know what you have heard."

Her face exhibited a temperature corresponding to the warm intonation of her words. Miss Cole's face also flushed at the heat of the skirmish.

"You may think that I am petty and jealous and all that, Charity, but when Fred's way with you is noticed by everybody I consider that I have good reason to speak of it. Only this morning I was told that I allowed him more liberties than most engaged girls would give their young men."

"That was Connie Davis, I suppose."

Jenny was silent.

"Connie Davis is a little meddling tit, and I shall tell her so! Look here, Jenny: you are my best friend here, and I hold that to flirt with your fiancé would be as mean a thing as a friend could be guilty of, and if I condescended to such a piece of business I should deserve all the horrid things you could wish me. But so long as Mr Seldon is no more than polite and acts in other ways as a gentleman should, you will have nothing to fear."

Miss Cole's eyes looked nearly on the point of weeping.

"I shouldn't cry if I were you, Jen. Look here: have it out with him to-night if you think you'll feel the better for it."

Jenny swallowed, and said:

"I think I will."

When, after ten o'clock, she appeared in the bedroom that she shared with Charity and other girls, it was evident from the inflamed condition of her eyes that Jenny Cole had passed through a storm. Charity was unable to question her owing to their shared privacy, and thinking it best not to talk to her on any other subject she refrained from addressing the girl. But in the darkness, at the dozing point, she came back suddenly to the consciousness of reality by hearing a sound of suppressed sobbing, that evidently proceeded from the corner which contained Jenny's bed. She listened for confirmatory evidence. There was no doubt of it. Jenny was in the throes of female misery. Assured by unmistakable aural testimony that the others were asleep, Charity left her own bed and groped her way to the sufferer, whom she addressed in an under-voice:

"What's the matter, Jen? Have you quarrelled?"

Momentarily the sobbing was louder; but at once the girl controlled it to allow herself speech:

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"He has given me up. It's all your fault, and—and I hate you!"

This was unwelcome information to Charity, but immediately viewing the statement, and the cause for it, practically, she attempted a soothing process:

"I don't think that things can be as bad as you imagine. I bet I'll be able to bring him to you for forgiveness. We must talk this out to-morrow. Go to sleep now, or the others will wake up. Let me tuck you in. There!"

Jenny's trouble was too great to allow her feeling against Charity to dissolve at the softening operation.

"It can never be mended—never! You have done the harm by coming between us; and I'll thank you not to interfere."

"If you really think that I have done harm, you shall see that I can do good; and I think that you'll beg my pardon for saying that, Jenny. Good-night," and she bent to kiss Miss Misery.

The caress was rejected with an impatient gesture, and Charity returned to bed. She reflected upon a course of action, listening occasionally to the almost silent weeping of the girl on whose behalf she had decided to act with vigour on the morrow. The sobbing was under control now, and, with the comfortable thought of good to accomplish, Charity fell asleep.

The morning beheld Jenny icebound. Her face had not recovered the disfigurement of her handkerchief's chafing, and although Miss Spinnet, by an inquiry, revealed that she had noticed Jenny's appearance, and asked if it were due to a cold, it was evident to Charity that her friend had passed the night in throes. As her advances were rejected by a view of Jenny's back whenever she approached, she determined upon an understanding of their relative positions, and, when Miss Spinnet retired to the basement at the dinner hour, she advanced to the ottoman where her friend was working with a needle. Miss Cole bridled at her putative rival's approach, but kept her eyes on her work.

"I've come to say, Jenny, that I don't think you have treated me at all fairly this morning. I've no wish to row with you, and I'm willing to help you if you'll let me, but I can do nothing so long as you contain yourself like an oyster."

The words were a draught to spring the blaze. Dropping her sewing Jenny Cole let fly untamed anger:

"I'll thank you not to speak to me, Miss Woodhams. Perhaps you'll reserve your breath for Mr Seldon. I wonder

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you have the face to come near me after what you have done ! I see now what you mean by saying that it is every girl's duty to get herself married. You've shown *your* way of going about it. Go on ! Keep it up ! I hate and despise you for your methods ! ”

These were scorpion words ; but pride, more than they, stung Charity's blood to flame. Her figure stiffened, and she rattled a thunder of unconsidered phrases upon the head of the trembling girl :

“ If you think that I'd marry a draper's assistant, with ‘ shop ’ written all over his face, Jenny Cole, you don't know me. I tolerate him—I tolerate all of you ; and I wouldn't remain in this place two minutes if it did not serve my purpose. Good heavens ! whatever do you take me for ? ”

“ I know your purpose—I've found it out ! You don't get over me with fair words. I've been fool long enough to swallow all your preachings. Some people can talk big and act mean, and I know *one*. ”

“ If you mean me you are more contemptible than I thought it possible for you to be. I came to you to offer myself as peacemaker between you and Mr Seldon ; but unless you apologise for what you have said I shall neither do that, nor shall I speak to you. It seems to me that you have either allowed jealousy to get the better of you, or Mr Seldon has, by misrepresentation, given you cause to think as you do. I am inclined to think it is the former. I have seen too much of Mr Seldon not to understand his manners, and unless you care to offer me an explanation of your conduct, you can please consider that I intend to take no further interest in you. ”

The sharp interchange ceased. Charity drew herself up to full height, turned her back, and descended to the shop.

At dinner she was aware that Jenny's place was vacant, and, knowing the reason, had no sympathy for it. Further, she observed that Mr Seldon had taken a seat at another table, the motive for which she also divined. He moved to her as they were leaving the room, and asked if Jenny had been detained by a customer.

“ Not that I am aware of. She is not in her usual humour. I am afraid that you have been neglecting her. ”

“ I have broken off our engagement. There were good reasons. ”

He gave her a meaning glance, and parted from her at the top of the stairs.

VII

BEHOLD quickly, at the marge of the sea, the birth of a Foam Goddess! For a moment her form, radiant to melt the ice of Hippolytus, flashes ivory white in the summer sun: Apelles' Anadyomene beside breaking wavelets, clad only in the chlamys. Only a glimpse—allowed to none more wanton than the Sea God—for modesty whispers intuitively within, and at the touch of her fingers, the massy hair drops down in a shining veil, half concealing the agate-lustrous bust, that rises and falls regularly to the miniature tide of breathings of a wide chest.

Quickly the Goddess is robed in a coarse blue dress of the bathing pattern used by mortal women, and is not vulgarised by the adoption. Actæon absent there is the chaste and serious air of Artemis in her bearing as she raises beautiful bare arms to twist her hair to a knot, and hides its lustre in an oilskin cap. Around her neck is a string of sham pearls, prismatic in the sunlight. Her fingers make sure of the fastening; and the Goddess sets bare feet to the pebbles and steps out on the beach, hobbling painfully and ungracefully to the edge of the sea. The journey is typical of mediæval mortals doing penance across a purgatory of flints, and by it the Goddess proclaims her mortality.

The discovery of a shallow cave in the face of the cliff bordering an unpopular strip of the shore near Black Rock during a listless afternoon walk, had suggested to Charity Woodhams the indulgence of half-holiday bathes on summer days. An experiment, tried timidly, became an almost regular custom when she had satisfied herself that this particular part of the coast was under guard of Providence during the hour of the bath. Jenny Cole had yielded to Charity's persuasion to teach her swimming, and often used to accompany her, for the two lost timidity in mutual companionship, and gained confidence in what, at first, had felt like a forbidden act.

To-day Charity was without the desire of a companion. The recent scene with Jenny Cole gave a suggestion of reflection, and she took her bathing dress and a novel with the

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idea of allowing thought to have its way. A wide black ribbon of shadow lay along the foot of the cliff, tempting to the enjoyment of its shade, and at the Syrens' Cave, as she had termed her retreat, she was still too much with thought to open her book.

Presently she lifted her head and looked at the sea. Small waves shuffled shoreward ; and at the horizon the pale blue of the sky was fitted to the darker blue of lumpy waters by an almost even joining. The spread of the waves on the sands was a temptation to Nereids to sport with them. She sniffed the breath of the sea ; and it banished unwelcome reflections for present enjoyment. A peep outward along the stretch of beach, and her rapid fingers fretted at strings and buttons. In five minutes she was wading out seaward.

When the water reached her knees she plumped down and came up with a splutter, her dress baggy and clinging. A few more steps and the flood was at her waist. Immediately she threw herself forward, eager for the swim, starting with a half-dozen strokes from the breast. She swam slowly, her head bobbing like a black cork on the surface. A smooth swell of wave was before her, and she uprose to meet it. As she mounted the hill her head was raised, so that her white neck showed gleaming. In a moment she was over the top, and sank into the shallow valley beyond, ready to breast the next advancing roll.

She turned on her back and kicked the sea into foam. The action tired her, and with horizontal head and body rigid she floated for rest, her small white feet stretched stiff on the surface. She retained the position five minutes, enjoying the heat of the sun on her body. Then suddenly she wriggled, and with renewed energy went forward again with a strong over-arm stroke.

Horizonward a fishing boat danced ; and she swam as if to board it. Her passage was swift, and the movement of the water drew the swimming-dress from her shoulder, which shone, white and rounded, in the sun. This freedom of the sea was her happiness, and there was no world for her but that of the waters. Joy in the exercise, joy in the feel of the soft water, joy in the warmth of the sun : the sea world was all a world of joy. To swim like this was the gift of the Sea God. To joy in it as she did was sufficient thanks to the god for the gift. Her thoughts of the world of yesterday were far off ; her gladness was in the pleasure of the moment, and the rapture of the great sea's silence. The enchantment

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of the brine was upon her, each muscle and pulse of her body rejoiced in the exercise and freedom, and she swam swiftly towards the sun, glad as a bird.

It was brave to see her. Sweeping her white arm backwards with majestic action she seemed to take pride in her own skill. Her hand grasped the wave and pushed it from her, while her cheek nestled at the surface as if she cushioned her head upon it.

She was nearly a half-mile out, and the fishing boat seemed as far off as ever. She had no considered intention of endeavouring to reach it, and she turned on her back again to rest for the return. She was loth to leave the world of open sea, but the shore was far away, and she turned for it, swimming with slower strokes that seemed to tell of her reluctance.

Shoreward she came, swimming with pluck, floating occasionally to spare her strength. Her feet touched sand, and she waded to the beach panting slowly; and, her body half-doubled, moved carefully across the painful pebbles, wiped the brine from her face with a towel seized from the Syrens' Cave, and stretched herself on the bank of shingle for the bath in the sun.

Her chest still heaved, but she showed no sign of real exhaustion. Her eyes sparkled, colour had come to her cheeks, she piped a tune. Her hand dived into the shingle and she tossed pebbles, for the world being her own she dallied with time. Her cheek sank to caress the bare shoulder, and she moved it backwards and forwards along the smooth round surface with the feline pleasure of a cat smoothing its coat against a human leg. The unconscious attitude was favourable to reflection, and her mind went back to dwell on the panorama of events of the last few days.

In enjoyment of the reaction after her swim, she could view the world new-made. Her recent scene with Jenny Cole was now a thing to laugh at, and Jenny jealous was a subject for her pity. That trait of her friend's character she could meet with the generosity of a superior mind; and she busied herself in weaving a plan by which, without loss of personal dignity, she might convince the girl that she had no ulterior motives with regard to Mr Seldon.

An alarming crunching of beach, not far away, signalled danger from the presence of her species, and she sank back into the shallowness of the recess. Her heart beat, while she trembled for her modesty. Since first entering the water no thought of danger of this kind had come to her, and she found

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herself victim to a slight momentary trembling which she seemed unable to command. The crunching ceased. She regained almost immediate self-control and peeped outward.

A man was at the base of the cliff, flinging off his coat. The discovery was a moment of horror for Charity, but as her will calmed her to think of a way out of the situation, her mind momentarily observed a spice of humour in the awkwardness of her position, and she smiled at the mental view of it.

Obviously she must await his entering the water to make her retreat. She began to dress rapidly. Presently the noise of a movement over the beach told her that he was going down to the sea. She hugged the cliff closer.

She saw him run out across the sand, stripped and nude as Adam, his body white and bright as he went to the embrace of the sea. At the lips of the waves he stood an instant, then boldly splashed forward. He pushed seaward, and she observed his head and white shoulders tossing on the bright surface.

Her rate of movement to be away was increased, but she could not forbear an occasional glance of admiration at the mighty hand-over-hand strokes of the swimmer going outward. It came of the pride that the skilful experiences in one of equal skill in an art common to both.

Admiration became alarm, then horror, at a sudden cry from the swimmer. He was in distress. She saw it, and started up with a blanched face, half-conscious of the creeping of her skin. An unmistakably repeated cry for help came from the sea, and Charity, in a state of frenzy, began to run down the beach. The summons came again before she had taken a dozen strides, and with unthinking madness she echoed it :

" Help !—oh, help ! "

Instinctively she turned to run for the break in the cliff, a half-mile away, her face white and frozen in horror. No one was to be seen, and the meaning of this came to her with full force on the instant. The help must be from her : for humanity she must be heroic. She kicked off her shoes, cast her skirts to the beach, and sprang over the sand like a hunted deer making for water.

She entered the sea with a reassuring shout, and shot swiftly forward, brain and body on the strain to save a life. Never had she swum so well. There was no changing of style in stroke, it was the powerful and propelling over-arm,

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and she swam straight for the bobbing head. Another shout of encouragement sprang from her lips, and her mouth took in salt water as it opened to let the sound free. On she pushed ; it was a breathless race between a woman and Death, with a human life for prize ; and the woman won by a length.

Her white arm sent its fingers into his dark hair, and clutching it she paddled away, careful to keep from a despairing embrace to drag her under. He was paddling exhaustedly, and getting her hand under his head she bade him float to her support. He appeared to be in pain, and thinking that he had struck himself against a rock, she presently asked if he were hurt. The reply came from a chest distressed :

"Cramp."

"In your leg ? Kick it out—hard."

"No—in my body."

This was serious. A clever swimmer might have made little of a cramped limb, and kept himself afloat with small peril. Cramp in the stomach rendered powerful swimmers impotent, and close to danger of their lives. Charity reflected.

"Can you paddle slowly ? I'll tow you back to shore."

"I think so. Let me hold to you."

He clutched her garment, and she struck for shore with slow strokes spread from the chest.

There was no longer any charm for her in breasting the sea. The water felt as a weight around her body to drag her down, and her swimming was laboured. Presently she turned to float, and offered him the support of her hand while he followed her action. In this position he spoke :

"Are you a woman ?"

"Don't talk now—save your breath."

He made no immediate reply, and the two continued to bob, like logs, helpless.

"You have wonderful pluck."

He spoke with a jerk, as if still in pain. Charity begged him to save his strength. She was reflecting on the awkwardness of the coming to shore. He asked a question :

"Is there a boat near ?"

She raised her head to sweep the sea. The fishing smack was still at the horizon, and there was a small fleet of rowing boats opposite the position of the town.

"There is nothing near enough to be of use to us."

"Shall we try again ?"

He grasped her garment, and they resumed the swim.

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Both were panting, she more than he. Floating became frequent ; the girl was becoming tired ; and she observed her companion's exhaustion with alarm. On their backs she suddenly heard him cry that he was going under, his hold on her was tightened to a vice-grip, and the volume of water, a surging flood in her ears, was as sudden night above her head. Instantly she was instinctively struggling in the twin death grip of the man and the sea, experiencing the agonies of asphyxia. Struggling she came to the surface after an eternity in the depths. It was the moment for quick action, and she gave him a hard blow in the face with the strong arm of despair. He sank like a plummet. She fetched deep breath, dived and, spluttering, brought him to the surface, a bunch of fingers in his hair, grasping it with strained muscles. A glance showed him unconscious ; and changing her grip of him to her left hand she struck forward wildly, towing him with his face above the surface.

She drew him from the water, and, sobbing dry sobs, began a witless, untutored treatment by artificial respiration. A movement of his chest caused her to place her cheek to his mouth to detect a sign of breathing. The evidence was unmistakable : she was sure that he was not unconscious through asphyxiation. Her blow had been surely delivered.

She left him to run for his clothing, lying a pile on the beach, the stones, painful to her feet, now unconsidered. There were flannel trousers among the garments, and, returning, she screwed them into a bunch, and rubbed his flesh vigorously. His white cheeks took the pink of his body under the brisk friction, and presently he drew a long shivering breath and opened his eyes on her. She threw his garment over him, and fled to her petticoats.

Her mind was tumbled under agitation. As she clothed her trembling body she observed the young man slowly raise himself, as if dazed. Sight of this action brought order to her mind, and she thought rapidly. She saw him draw his clothes forward ; and, shouting that she was going for assistance, sped along the beach.

Panting she reached a fisher-boy at his lobster pots, told him of a man in distress, and bade him speed to help. Then on she ran to the outskirts of the town, burst into the bar of a public-house, bought brandy in a flask, begged the landlord to send it to the beach, and ordered a cab to meet her rescued man as he came from the shore. To none did she give the

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story of the part she had played ; her desire was for the shelter of her bedroom, and she went to it with quick strides as if she hastened from a terrible thing.

At Masons' establishment this girl of pronounced ideas and vigorous actions sought her room, white and trembling, locked the door, sank to a chair, and for a full ten minutes gave way to the flood of her woman's tears, in very shame of a vivid recollection of her predicament.

VIII

THE acquisition of a Chef of Reputation is surely fair excuse for the holding of a special stomach festival; the drawing of fusty corks from the dwindling stock of old Bouquet of the bin reserved for Christian feast days; the burning of the rare incense of good Havana; the contentment coming with the comfort of satisfaction of physical and mental ease, and no menacing events casting shadows to destroy digestion. A Chef of Reputation, as the doer of much good, should be sung by Poets, form the subject of masterpieces of Painters and Sculptors, be remembered by generations, and accounted fit to rank with the Acknowledged Great.

John Woodville Graham, banker, of Brighton, had just acquired a Chef of Reputation: a Hungarian come to learn the English tongue, and practise his art among barbarians fed on beef and mustard. "We English can do most things, but we can't cook." This was a frequently repeated sentence of old Graham, who had adopted it from an utterance of the Comte de Redincote, who had given it at dinner in the presence of Graham and other members of the Cosmopolitan. The dismissal of John Graham's English female cook with a month's wages and a present followed the banker's train of reflection on the subject, and Valentin Antal, of reputation at leading foreign hotels, sat on the culinary throne in a British gentleman's kitchen.

The Chef must be proved at a private service to the Stomach God. Valentin was commanded a free hand, and told to provide for three. Admiral Sheepshanks, with the super-patriotic Englishman's suspicion of the foreigner, declined to be present unless a favourite dish of pancakes were provided, "made in the English way," or from a recipe he used when in the navy. "Pancakes," said the Admiral, "exercise the digestive organs; they titillate the palate, and satisfy the appetite. Pancakes and molasses, *à l'Américaine*, should be served to your Navy every first of June, as fitting commemoration of the duel with the *Chesapeake*."

The Grahams, father and son, held Admiral Sheepshanks

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their dearest friend; "mates" was his shipboard term for them. Vice-Admiral Everard Craven Sheepshanks, M.P. and C.B., had been retired from the navy with captain's rank by an Order in Council, which compulsorily resigned naval captains at the age of fifty-five. That order had been promulgated by a civilian First Lord, and was quoted by the Admiral as a magnificent example of the blunders that arose from allowing political civilians, legitimately shining as quill-drivers, a powerful hand in service matters. He declared that landlubber legislators who saw naval captains old and useless at fifty-five, and statesmen young at seventy, suffered from a peculiar form of ophthalmia that required spectacles of severe strength for its correction. The law, saying that he was no good in the navy, had retired him for the betterment of the service; and he had been forced to see that he was not fit for anything but politics, "worse luck!" He said "worse luck" because naval men had no respect for politicians, and he had only taken up politics because statesmanship was a very pleasant occupation for the leisured classes, of which he was now a member, and because he had no intention of rusting in dry dock. Having once got into the House he intended to remain, and do his best to bring the administration of the navy into accord with naval sentiment.

He sat as Member for the ancient cinque port of Rye, always declaring that he must smell salt to live, and that he would rather represent a cinque port than a city, because he felt, in so doing, closer to the navy he was sworn to win points for in the House. Though not Sussex bred he had additional pride in his constituency because the Imperial Navy dated its origin from the cinque ports. The fisherfolk of Sussex, descended from a daring and rugged race of hereditary smugglers, made the best seamen on earth. That, also, was a point to gain the Admiral's pride of them.

The man was a rattle; but he always demanded a good listener, for he salted his conversation with wit. His humour was explosive; it came as from a mortar, to convulse suddenly with a burst of laughter. In ordinary conversation it bubbled repeatedly—its presence signified in other ways than words: in a look, a smile, a wink, a shrug of shoulders—overflowing in mirth. So boisterous were his spirits under normal conditions that he might, though bordering sixty, have been a modern Æson rejuvenated by Medea.

He talked eternally of ships, seamen, politics and Parliament; on the subject of the British Navy he always waxed

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dithyrambic. His dreams were of Empire, and for that reason he had set himself down for a political visionary. It was his saying: "The ideal of the ideal British Admiral is to make his fleet better than the best ship in the British Navy"; and the means to perfecting the navy being his business and his hobby it is reasonable to presume that had he controlled the good ship *National Finance* he would have wrecked her on the rocks of extravagance. Blunt and British, and favouring the effectiveness of slang, his speech at times was characteristic of Goya's unlovely frankness. His political enemies, therefore, found him a tease; but such was his habitual joviality that wounds given by him in public were generally forgiven in private, and for this reason his opponents never brought themselves to say hard things of him.

Physically small he stood with sea-bow legs. His face was open and sun-dried, like an old parchment, with deep claw marks at the corner of the eyes; in laughter it crumpled up. His head was tipped with grey, but gave no promise of baldness. He had a hearty out-of-door voice, which he could raise to a boatswain's roar. This was a preposterous thing to come from one so small and dapper, and it pointed him out to mirth.

It was the pickthanks' secret whisper that the Grahams were Above Buttons. Dislike must have become dry tindery stuff to take such sparks: and in the case of the Grahams this flame-like report was kept under smother, for the family was popular. Its few enemies were welcome to have the hearsay to themselves so far as the rest of the world was concerned, for popularity damps down rumours smouldering to scorch personalities. One cannot partake of Demos' dinner and finish the feast by reminding him that he had his origin in the skip-jacks. Therefore what the world knew of the Graham family it was perfectly willing to appear to have forgotten.

In earlier days of the house's history, before popularity had been won, the world was not so astute. It remembered its love of scandal, and even things remotely related thereto. Confidential undertones declared that John Graham's father had made his money by bringing franc pieces over from France and passing them as English shillings. Truth was thus piquantly spiced with fiction, and found palatable. John Graham, the elder, had come to Brighton from the North, set his name over a shop, and married the daughter of a captain of one of the sailing vessels running between Brighton and Dieppe. Those were the high days of the Sussex

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smuggler ; and thus may be had a guess at the secret of old John Graham's early fortune. Excelsior riches mounted from height to height ; and at the death of his father-in-law John Graham senior was possessed of sufficient capital to enable him to open a private bank at a time when audacity had better chances of success than confidence.

Before middle-age John Graham had acquired ambition. He could afford to declare political opinions, and he adopted a Liberal motto : " The Greatest Good to the Greatest Number." To himself he interpreted the " Greatest Number " as Number One.

When, therefore, he had risen to the view of the world on a self-delved mound of ninety thousand pounds he looked round to see how he might find a place in the fashionable society of the time.

There was Politics. The display of activity in that field might do much for him, but he was ripening in years, and physical energy was tending to impotency. He decided to leave that opening to his son, John Woodville, and while seeking to find entrance by another door, an unexpected one was flung wide open to him.

A financial panic of the early nineteenth century swooped down to give sudden death-blows to many cropped-up banks. In the crisis John Graham proved himself a Banker among bankers, and so well secured his anchorage that he was able to ride the storm. While other and older establishments in the town were engulfed in the swirl, the old man took his station every day behind his counter from the opening to the closing hour, paying all demands from heavy bags of gold at his elbow. John Graham emerged from the ordeal stronger than ever, the number of his friends swelled to troops, and Popularity and Society were won.

A year later death cheated him of his hopes of a political career for his son. John Woodville, by his father's action, had been admitted to the closest circles of the town, but the drain on his father's money bags had never reflowed in full tide. The financial crash of its neighbours had made too many of the bank's customers over wary, and the younger Graham had to devote the energy intended for a political career wholly to matters of business. He took a wife, and begat a son ; and in the person of that son he hoped to see the family ambition realised.

In fostering this ambition he became miserly of money ; but he was miserly for young George's sake. The book that

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had most influenced his life was his bank-book ; and reports of his balance gained him respect. The death of his wife had not softened his character ; he chased off thoughts of her in actively forwarding his boy's career. He was proud of George, who had the manners, and who had been given the education, of a gentleman. He changed his politics, went over to the Tories, and heard it said by his late political friends that he had joined the Party of Bounce and Bunkum.

George Graham had been designated a "promising youth." The ambition of his father and grandfather had been sown and fostered within him. It had made of him a mental mountaineer bent on ascending from height to height. He had ideas, running riot within, and the ability to bring order out of chaos, himself to reap the benefit. This was his aim, good in a budding politician. For the rest his attitude towards the hazards of life was that of general hospitality.

Admiral Sheepshanks, often in residence at a Brighton hotel, was at John Graham's house to test his chef and discuss young George's career. Plagiarizing the Comte de Redincote John Graham said :

"Cooking is an art ; and in England we have women cooks in our big houses ! What do women know about art ?"

"They pretend more than they know, and they've no right to know anything. Your cook is French, of course. Frenchmen are born to art, my friend—painting, sculpture, furniture, women's dress, cooking, and all the finikin things. They've no blood ; that's where their navy fails. They don't know the virtues of beef and beer. Who cares a dump for your ragouts and réchauffés ? Our nation was created for high things ; a stomach for sauces and kickshaws would enfeeble it. There is danger to young George if you feed him on French fricassées. Naval tack is the belly timber to brace the back."

"George has our blood ; a difficult thing to enfeeble. I've bred him to an end."

"Pooh !—politics ! You'd have done better to have made him an able seaman. I've said that before."

"I'm a plain man, Admiral ; but I've the successful Englishman's ambition for those of my blood. My boy's a gentleman ; I have brought him up as one, and I'm not to be blamed if I wish to place him in a position where his advantages will shine best. That's why I intend him for Parliament. He shall cut a figure in society and the state. Who

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knows that by his own ability he may not yet bring a title into the family." He laughed. "We are forming a strong committee; and I want you to help my boy in the election. You have handled the ropes."

"An old hulk permanently retired to dock is very little good for fight, my friend; but I'll help George all I can. I like him. He's a typical Englishman—a strong-backed man, as we should say in the navy, with plenty of courage, reserve of energy, self-will, and all that kind of thing. Yes; he'll get on—if you don't spoil him. I'm paying him the highest compliment when I say that he is a good naval officer utterly spoiled and ruined."

"He's sworn to use all his influence for the betterment of the navy if he gets to the House. He belongs to the party that has done more for the navy than any other."

"Naval men don't care a brass farthing about party in government. All parties are bad—bad in the eyes of naval men because no government hardly has ever done its duty by the service."

"We agree on that. Naval men—and men sworn to support naval measures—must be strengthened in Parliament. England needs it. Our young politicians must be shown their duty in this respect."

"It is necessary. Our young men are flabby. The tendency of the modern young man is to become limp in the back. He wants bracing. You are fortunate in George. He's late to dinner."

"I'll marry him to a rich woman, Admiral."

"Marry him! A man with a career that is to be devoted to his country's good has no time to waste on a wife. He must learn to discipline his character against women. If you want him married make him a parson, a grocer—or let him remain a banker. Don't send him to Parliament."

"A Parliament man should be well-to-do if he is to devote all his time to his country. Money leads men to greatness in this world."

"You're a worldling, Mate John. A man is oftener judged by the size of his purse than by the size of his head. That's how the public regard you. You abase yourself before the golden image with the crawling obsequiousness that distinguished the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Make your George a rich man and he'll have a whole fleet of tenders, in the shape of hangers-on, wherever he goes. They'll fasten to him like barnacles. Time for that when he inherits what you've got

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to leave him. Anchor him to a rich woman at the outset of his career, and you may as well blow up the ship at once."

"I'm a plain banker, old friend; and I've got my ambitions. If I wish to marry my boy to an heiress the worst you can say is that it is an ambition born of my trade."

"Born of your trade, man! It's in your blood! You think too much of prosperity, and you'd have George think the same. Very well; he won't value the money bags when he gets 'em. None of them do unless they've filled 'em themselves. Give the boy a good income if he goes to the House—it will be necessary to his position—but don't marry him if you wish him to do big things."

The door opened to interrupt the dialogue, and admit George. His father assumed an appearance of fume:

"Come, George; this is not fair to my new cook."

"I ask pardon, father; my unpunctuality is unavoidable."

The Admiral was rubbing his hands together, while in imagination he warmed his back at the empty grate. He spoke pleasantly:

"A naval training would have made you punctual, Mate George. Our stomachs piped to dinner ten minutes ago. Punctuality is the first duty of the well-regulated man. Your navy would go to pot without it."

"An accident detained me, sir."

"Accidents never happen to well-regulated men."

"I might not have come at all; an hour ago I was nearly drowned."

The two seniors ejaculated a monosyllabic duet of alarmed surprise.

"It is true, father. I was bathing from the beach between Black Rock and Rottingdean, got cramp, felt myself struggling for what seemed an eternity when I was suddenly clutched by the hair, and found myself being towed by one who swam with powerful strokes. My rescuer was a woman."

The dinner gong rolled. The hungry Sea Dog was the only one to notice it. He had to hint his hunger:

"We'll have the full story at the table, George."

John Graham made a qualification:

"When the servants have left."

They marched to the dining-room, and seated themselves, a jovial trinity. The superiority of Valentin was promptly acknowledged, the Admiral claiming excellence for the pancakes, of which he ate three, and, with permission, sending to the kitchen for the recipe.

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"Your man is qualified to cook for a First Lord, John—a naval lord, mind; your civil First Lord deserves no better tack than watered rum and ship's biscuit."

The Sea Dog always barked at a sound of the Admiralty's civil lords, remembering, though having forgiven, how they had used him.

The butler closed the door on his departure; and John Graham was prompt in his demand for the recital of his son's adventure. It was briefly done, and the Admiral made his comment:

"The most unsatisfactory thing about the affair, George, is that your rescuer was a woman."

"Embarrassing."

"What was she doing on the beach when a man was bathing? That's what I want to know! You can't say she was up to any good."

"She did some good, I hope, in saving my life at the risk of her own."

"Well, we'll grant that. Now, I suppose, you'll fall in love with her, marry her, and wreck your career at the outset. Women have ruined a man's politics before to-day. Look at Cleopatra, look at——"

"Really, Admiral, I don't even know her name, or where she lives; and you know I'm not the man to succumb to love at first sight."

John Graham intervened:

"Such a thing would be a disaster, indeed. In his zeal that you should not spoil your career, George, by becoming entangled in skirts, the Admiral is somewhat ungallant to the sex. It is well it is not represented here."

It was the Admiral's wish to qualify the impression of his want of gallantry:

"Women deserve our respect when they keep to their proper sphere. I honour those that do. They were only created to bring men into the world. That was their function in ancient Sparta; and I'd have it so in England. Women would not hold their present false position were it not for the piffle of the poets. If I had my way poets should be banished, as Plato advised."

John Graham hinted a gentle remonstrance:

"Your mother was a woman, my friend."

"True. She gave the world a man child, and so did her duty as a woman—God rest her. She did her duty again when she dedicated her child to the British Navy."

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Young George was anxious on account of his preserver :

"I shall certainly feel dissatisfied until I can discover the identity of my rescuer, father. We must remember that I owe her more than I can pay."

"We'll find her out—a boatman's daughter, no doubt—and see that her pluck receives proper recognition. Let us hope that she can control her tongue. I should hate this to get into the newspapers ; no need for that."

Admiral Sheepshanks thought it a point on which a friend's cooler judgment should not be ignored :

"Best not make too much of it. What is bravery but a name for insensibility to a proper appreciation of eventualities—a sort of moral stupidity ? If the woman has any self-respect she'll prefer that you take no steps to find her out."

George fired :

"To my mind, Admiral, this is no occasion for theorizing ! The woman—whoever she was—possesses true courage—the sort of courage that does not look for applause. That is proved by the fact that she did not even stay for my thanks."

"I think that that proves her self-respect. It is clear to me that she didn't desire thanks."

"I'll take the risk of offending her by not resting until I have given her some proof of my gratitude."

"Well, so long as you don't fall in love with her I'll not complain."

John Graham supported his son.

"You are right, George. It is a mistake always to take our friend too seriously—you ought to know that as well as anyone. We'll discover this woman. Try an advertisement in the papers, but don't publish your name or address. I sha'n't be ungenerous to her. We'll decide what to do when we know who she is."

IX

SALES may be named the grand propelling power to Drapery. Fashion's caprices, that call for perishable modes, exquisite and expensive, make huge profits and pay big dividends from goods "marked down." Change of season and the consequent incoming of new "stock" is made an excuse for internal upheaval, the stocking to repletion of windows with Feminality's foibles offered at "sacrifice," which has the result of depleting showrooms and swelling companies' coffers.

Messrs Masons were in the fortnight whirl of their "Summer Sale." From morning to night the establishment was a London bustle of madams and maidens bargaining and buying. The commissionaire ceased his sentry beat outside the premises to occupy himself in the intermittent duty of opening the shop door to customers. The inward bustle was ordered: shopwalkers directing ladies to departments desired, hum of talk, click of cash balls, and, everlastingly and loudest "Sign! sign!" from multiloquent assistants at the counters.

Bustle deferred the dwelling upon thought, and Charity welcomed it. The incident of the Unknown's rescue was banished to the back tablets of her brain, to be scanned in the quiet moments between entering bed and falling to sleep. There she found that the slavery of the sale had bestowed fatigue; the comfortable gift was given promptly at her wish, and as she settled herself to the breast of quiet, it came densely on her brain and lingering reflection was again postponed. There were times in waking moments when she was fully conscious of memory's vivid existence, and she had to dwell with it as long as leisure allowed. The shame of it was a shuddering thing, which she could tolerably bear, providing the Unknown remained unknown and unmet.

Jenny Cole's attitude towards Charity did not melt during the heat of the sale. Spinosity of humour rendered her as unapproachable as the porcupine; and she might have stood a female Stylites on her pillar of reserve, her heart bled of love, and usurped by bitter jealousy. The humour, being feminine, was not necessarily volatile. She fattened it in secret, and

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allowed it to peep from her eyes whenever, accidentally, they encountered those of Charity. Within the breast of her inferred rival contempt for the jaundiced eye was making room for an approaching pity for the misery of the poor pale-faced girl. During the last few days Jenny's usual pallor had abnormally whitened; and Charity could not disguise from herself the fact that she appeared really ill. Yet, in spite of resolutions, a week had to pass before she brought herself to allow the toppling of her pride in remembrance of the insult of the girl's remarks in the last spoken scene with her. But the constant presence of misery unremoved caused pity to rap continuously at her heart, and, pocketing pride, she gently insinuated sympathy.

It was useless! The female Troglodite spurned it, and retreated deeper into the icy cave of her reserve. Pride immediately banished pity, and Charity spoke with her face at the flush:

"Upon my word, Jenny, you deserve no commiseration from me, for you shrink like a snail at a touch!"

"I don't want your sympathy, Miss Woodhams; and I'll thank you not to interfere in anything that concerns me."

"Very well; if you prefer to sulk I shall not endeavour to prevent you."

During the comparative peace of a wet evening Charity was amusing herself with a copy of the week-end *Brighton Herald* when her eye met an announcement in the newspaper's publicity columns:

"If this should be seen by the Lady who rendered a signal service to a Gentleman under exceedingly delicate circumstances on the beach near Black Rock on Saturday last, she is earnestly requested to forward her name and address, in strict confidence, to G., c/o Benson's Library, who wishes to take means to convey thanks for his indebtedness."

She took immediate action, and, sitting at the table, wrote:

"Will G., in view of the circumstances attending the incident he refers to in his advertisement, kindly excuse his rescuer from coming forward, or otherwise making herself known, as he suggests. She will thus consider herself sufficiently thanked."

The posting of this epistle was equally prompt; and re-

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turning to the common room Charity requested a companion to engage her in a game of draughts.

In certain intervals of her present manner of life Charity was forced to make room for reflection. She could not conceal from herself a suggestion that a day might arrive when she would meet the Unknown face to face ; and her blood mantled at the dreadful thought. Her chance of escape from such an uncomfortable eventuality lay in the suggestion that the Unknown might possibly be a visitor to the town, and, in the hope that this was so, and that he might have reasonable time in which to complete his visit and be gone, for the next few days she kept herself to the house during recreation hours.

One afternoon, following Jenny Cole's absence from the dinner-table, Charity was somewhat surprised, on returning to the showroom, to find the girl not present. Expecting her coming she made no inquiry, until Miss Spinnet informed her that she had gone home unwell, a letter from her mother having requested her absence for a few weeks for recuperation. Miss Spinnet accounted for Jenny's malady in her own way :

" She is not really fit for an indoor life. I've always thought her delicate. She tells me that she has never had measles ; and I shouldn't be surprised if she is sickening for it now. Anæmic girls have no right to be in a business house. She's always taking iron pills ; a thing I never hold with. What she ought to do is to play tennis all day."

" Her mother couldn't afford to let her live like that. Jenny is one of eight children, and the father is only a clerk."

" Then she should offer herself as a nursemaid if she can't afford any other way of frequently getting fresh air."

" I think I shall go and see her on Saturday afternoon."

" That would be madness ! You'll get infected, and bring measles here. Fancy the whole shop down with measles in sale time !"

" Oh, I shall be all right ; I've had it. Besides, you don't know that it is measles."

" It looks very much like it ; and until we know what is really the matter with her I must ask you to stay away. I'll write to her mother and make inquiries in a day or two, and if it's nothing infectious I shall probably go with you."

Charity had little faith in Miss Spinnet's ability in pathological diagnosis. She thought that at her time and condition of life it was a matter for excuse that such affections as play havoc with feelings and sentiments should be overlooked. She therefore decided to keep her senior in ignorance of what

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she felt sure was the true cause of Jenny Cole's malady and absence, and resolved to sink her pride once more and visit the girl on the next half-holiday.

On retiring to her bedroom that night Charity observed that Jenny's box was not in its usual place. Its absence was significant, and she decided that Jenny must have been aware that her departure from Masons was intended to be a permanent one, and that the removal of the box during the dinner hour was contrived as a means of escaping what, under the circumstances, might have been an ignominious good-bye to her fellow-workers. Poor girl! Charity's sympathy for her was doubled.

The exigencies of the sale necessitated a daily rearrangement of Masons' windows, not sufficient to necessitate a lowering of the blinds; and Charity's attention during the process was, one morning, attracted to the outside of the window into which two ladies and a gentleman were gazing. The ladies were unnoticed in her mortification at a recognition, in the gentleman, of the Unknown. He had seen her, and she stepped from the window to hide her crimson confusion. Agitation immediately ensued; and then she was painfully aware of the succeeding pallor of her face.

Would he enter? That was the prompt question that gave her alarm. In the endeavour to spare herself shame she lost control of her usually well-ordered thoughts, and, with a message to Mr Seldon by one of the shop girls, that she was unwell and begged to be absent for an hour, she fled to the bedroom and laid herself upon the bed.

Instinctively she closed her eyes, as if to shut out a vision of the Unknown's face. Waves of heat floated across her; her very body was blushing. What she should do to escape him; what she should do if they met were miserable matters that seemed beyond the power of reflection to solve.

Her train of thought was diverted by the opening of the bedroom door, and her immediate unconsidered conclusion was that the stranger had come into the shop in quest of her. But she found that the intruder was Mrs Jarvis, the house-keeper, sent by the kind thought of Miss Spinnet, with an inquiry, and the suggestion of a cup of tea.

The small effort of declining braced her, and she descended to the shop. A minute's waiting for the half-expected message discovered to her no cause for alarm, and she was forced to see how foolish had been her fears. But even the bustle of work could not compel the banishment of the thought that

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she was discovered, and the day was the most uncomfortable she had spent away from the circumstances of her home.

In the evening she kept to the house from an absurd fear of meeting him. She dreaded the morrow's window process with what she was compelled to admit was an absurd dread. Not deficient in courage she seized it by the throat, entered upon the necessary duties, and raised her eyes to the street. He was there, watching her from the opposite side of the road.

To her horror she saw him make a movement as if to cross to the shop, but she signalled disapproval by a slight and almost unconscious shake of the head, and descended from the window. As she did so she saw him move his hand to his hat, and walk forward in the swim of passing pedestrians.

To-day her head was cool for thought, and from the back of the window she drew Mr Seldon's attention to the Unknown :

"Who is that gentleman in the grey suit who has just passed?"

"I did not notice him."

"There he goes—with the coloured band round his straw hat."

"He looks like Mr Graham—son of old John Graham, of Graham's Bank. He is to be a candidate at the next parliamentary election. What makes you ask?"

"Curiosity. I've seen him pass the shop two or three times lately. Have you heard anything of Jenny?"

He looked uncomfortable under Charity's reading eye, but his reply was quiet enough :

"I've only heard that she went home unwell the other afternoon. I daresay that she will be back in a week at most."

"Don't you think that you might effect an immediate cure if you paid her a visit on Saturday afternoon?"

He understood her meaning, but his answer was vehemently spoken :

"That is impossible!"

Charity did not like the energy of his words, which her woman's intuition read as being of a deep and subtle meaning.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I had hoped that the difference between Jenny and yourself was nothing more than a lovers' tiff."

"No, Miss Woodhams. It was an earnest and unfortunate affair. I may be to blame, but I made a mistake, and it was better to have discovered that before it was too late, and be

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the cause of a temporary misery, than to find, at an irrevocable time, that the misery was made for life."

"But you promised to marry her, you know; and the man who gives his word to a girl only to withdraw it does so at the peril of ruining her for life. That is why I am in strong sympathy with the law of Breach of Promise; although, as a matter of fact, no amount of 'damages' can compensate a woman for the heart-burning and degradation of a rejected love." Then with a suggestion of humour she added: "What sort of figure do you think you would cut in a Breach of Promise Court, Mr Seldon?"

"A pretty poor one, I should imagine; but I'm willing to risk even that."

"Well, you'll be lucky if you escape it. You thoroughly deserve it—and with a jury of women to try you, too!"

"I shall, at anyrate, be spared that ignominy, thank goodness!"

"And the punishment must be left to your conscience."

"It does punish me, I assure you. Some day I may be able to tell you the real reason for breaking off the engagement, and then, perhaps, I shall have your sympathy."

"I think not."

"We shall see. I'm satisfied to wait."

As she expected, Charity found the Coles' house in an unfashionable street—one of a row of ignoble dwellings blankly staring at the road. The lower front window of number twenty-nine framed a wide white card proclaiming "Furnished Apartments," the sill being filled with consumptive geraniums craving air. A short, thin, sallow-faced woman, in whom Charity discerned a being martyred to the same cause as her own mother—the martyrdom of poverty, overwork, and distressful motherhood—answered her summons.

"Is Miss Cole at home, please?"

"She went away yesterday, to her aunt's in the country."

A pause preceded Charity's reply:

"How was she? I am Miss Woodhams—Charity Woodhams. I daresay you have heard her speak of me."

"Oh!"

The exclamation meant much, and Charity perceived all the meaning.

"I really hope that there was nothing serious the matter with her."

"I wonder you can say that, Miss Charity Woodhams—you who have been the cause of all the mischief! My poor

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Jenny was as good a girl as mother need have, and helped me with her earnings, which she might have spent on herself—me who have borne and nursed eight children, and have toiled for them and done for them, and given them all I could afford—more than I could afford; I have denied myself everything and them nothing; and now one of 'em comes home and tells me she's been jilted!"

The little woman's hand left the door knob, and carried the hem of her soiled apron to her eyes.

"I'm truly sorry for you, Mrs Cole; but I really cannot be blamed."

"Jenny was happy enough till you came to Masons'; though I always told her that Fred Seldon wasn't good enough for her. But when a girl's made up her mind to a young man there's no altering it."

"I told her myself that she was too good for Mr Seldon; but I think she is really the victim of her own jealousy."

"It's all very well for you to say that, Miss Charity Woodhams. 'Tis you who have done the mischief, and 'tis you that Jenny blames. I only hope that he won't jilt you as he's jilted her, though, maybe, I think you deserve it."

"I see that it is of no use arguing the point with you, Mrs Cole. However, I should like to write to Jenny if you will be good enough to give me her address."

"It won't mend matters."

"Very well; I'll say good-afternoon. Let me also tell you, as I have told your daughter, that I should no more think of engaging myself to Mr Seldon than I should think of marrying a cannibal king. He is not a man I admire sufficiently for *that*!"

She turned and walked away rapidly to exhaust her simmering anger. Her regret and blame for herself were on account of the fact that she had not shown more dignity, and because she had made any advance whatever with the object of leading Jenny back to the primrose paths of the love that had been hers. At the moment she felt desperately inclined to enter into a flirtation with Fred Seldon as a matter of pique.

Anger and resentment were still at the simmer when she became aware of the presence of a bowing gentleman standing in her way. He was the man she had rescued from drowning, and her confusion was painful. He advanced with a respectful hand at the brim of his hat, and her colour deepened.

"Pardon me, Miss—— I have not yet the pleasure of

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knowing your name—please pardon me for intruding. I respect the feelings you spoke of in your note—which, believe me, I share equally with you—but after seeing you the other day I could not do myself the injustice of allowing you to receive only the cold expression of my indebtedness that was conveyed in the newspaper. May I walk with you to the end of the street ? ”

“ Please don’t. I would rather you did not. I’m sure you are grateful for what I did, but I should be glad if you’d refrain from further allusion to it on account of the reason I gave in my letter. Forgive me if I seem brusque, Mr Graham.”

“ Ah, you have an advantage in knowing my name ! You have not told me yours.”

“ Please don’t ask.”

“ That is not fair. I could find out, but I would rather hear it from you.”

“ That would not be fair to me after hearing my wish that you should not know it.”

“ That wish must not be an absolute decision, please.”

“ It must—I wish it.”

“ May I walk with you down the street ? ”

“ Please don’t ask that, either.”

“ But we are walking now—we are nearly at the end already.”

“ Oh ! ”

She stopped simultaneously with the utterance of the word of surprise.

“ There is only a hundred yards to the corner. May I ? You haven’t the heart to send me back ? ”

“ Well—if you will promise to leave me at the end.”

“ You are cruel.”

“ No ; the position is painful to me.”

“ I’ll not mention your brave deed again—to-day.”

“ And you will leave me at the corner ? ”

“ If you insist, although——”

“ I do, please.”

They walked on together. In the brief succeeding silence each endeavoured to think of a subject to speak upon. At length Graham began to angle for conversation : had she lived long in Brighton ? Had she parents ? Might he call upon them ? How long had she been at Masons ? He hoped she did not think his questions rude.

She answered in terms that were unsatisfactory to him.

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She was evidently bent on defeating his plan for a better acquaintanceship. They reached the end of the street. She stopped, and he spoke again :

"Must I leave you now?"

"Yes, please."

"Without knowing your name?"

"Well, if——"

"I may take steps to discover it, you know."

"You would not do that!"

"You place an unwarranted trust in me."

"I take you for a gentleman."

He bowed. "I should keep your name as sacred as a gentleman would."

"Well, if you promise to keep the assistance I gave you a strict secret——"

"I have already told my father and a friend."

She coloured. "Then I think I had better not tell you."

She saw disappointment in his face, and immediately thought she was too hard on him. She was at the point of conceding when he spoke again :

"It was natural of me to tell my father. The gentleman who shares the secret is an old friend, and is to be trusted; neither he nor my father will speak of it to others."

"I'll trust them in that on your recommendation. You will keep the incident to yourself?"

"I am willing to respect your wishes."

"And you won't seek to recognise me if we meet again?"

"I think you ask too much. You will surely not deny me that pleasure."

"It is best so."

"You can have no sufficient reason for saying that."

"You are a gentleman, a public character, and I am only an assistant in a draper's shop."

"You are a lady, and one whom I should be pleased to call my friend if you would allow it."

She extended her hand :

"Good-bye, Mr Graham."

"Not good-bye; good-afternoon, Miss——?"

"Woodhams—Charity Woodhams. There, you have it!"

She laughed. "Now respect my wishes, and please leave me."

Their hands closed in farewell, and he gave his hat a flourish worthy to rank as obeisance to a queen. She did not seem to notice it, and he watched her mix with the crowd.

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X

SUCH Alnaschan visions as form the day-dreams of ambitious mortals were the principal imaginings of Charity Woodhams at this period of her existence. Chief of these was the ideal of her life : the pursuit of the object she had in leaving her home was the ever-present thought. Patience in waiting for the realisation of her desire was a hard thing to encompass ; and daily she built castles in the air, with herself and a husband for the inhabitants thereof. She was convinced of a similar desire in the young women about her, who by trivial coquettish actions, discovered that they had nothing so important in view as marriage, and who were individually but awaiting favouring time and circumstances. It was equally thus with the men, inferior beings that her ambition scorned. Honest, frivolous, trivial they were ; marriage with one of them and life in a parlour behind a shop was a thing at which to shudder !

Clashing sensations, and an internal sickening, that had succeeded her meeting with George Graham, had rendered her a composition of unenviable emotions. That day of varied events had outraged her pride, her modesty and her self-respect ; and so long as she remained in Brighton she would go in fear of all three. She took a resolve : as soon as the sale was over she would look for employment in some other town, and leave this place that had become hateful to her in the passage of a few weeks.

Where to go was matter for consideration. She was aware that to pursue her ambition in marrying a man above the sphere of her present life she must move in a higher plane of society. He, to whom she had introduced herself in so curious a manner, was, she reflected, the type to which she aspired. She was sure that she could have practised her woman's subtlety upon him under any other circumstances, but she felt that present circumstances precluded her art.

Was the sense of modesty to which she was victim absurd ? It was certainly painful. Women, she believed, existed who, in a similar situation, would have banished the sentiment as

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barrier to the working of their own ends. Her mental cultivation did not admit her modesty as true and natural. There remained, then, the man's view, and she chose to think, from what the interview with him had revealed, that he, with greater cause for, and opportunity of dissimulation, in reality felt none. The subject provided toughness of thought, and she took an evening walk to unpick the knot.

Stars like tapers emblazoned black sky above the quiet ways through which she wandered. The view of them made her sick to love someone she did not know, and could not picture apart from Mr Graham, on whose little-known personality she reflected almost unconsciously. Subtle summer scents and warm breaths were sufficient cause for sentimental musings, and the vulgar arm-and-waist methods of passing bucolic lovers, in places where the evening was black, had poetry for her present humour. Where to place her love she knew not ; impatiently she wished to give it somewhere. The young man Graham !

What of him ? She awoke to the consideration of her thought with a start. She had no shadow of love for him, and could have none, but he was her type, the first man of culture she had met outside her own circle. She could picture his character. He was a gentleman, one to make a woman proud of owning him. He was ambitious : his aspiration to take a high place in the world proved that. He would make his own ambition the ambition of the woman he loved. Perhaps he was already pledged ; no doubt he was. It was hardly likely that such a man, moving in the circles of society, should not be. A momentary jealousy against some woman unknown gave her a slight spasm of the heart ; and then she laughed at the absurdity of jealousy on account of one who was nothing to her. There was no hope for a shop-girl.

This was unpleasant dreaming, and she strode forward to dispel the vision. The sudden sound of quick footsteps behind her assisted her to more material thoughts. The sale would be over at the end of the week, and then she would advertise for a situation in a business house in some other town.

Her name was spoken in a voice that she immediately recognised. She faced round :

" Is it you, Mr Seldon ? "

" Excuse me, Miss Woodhams. I saw you go out, and, as I have something to say to you which I have long been waiting to say, I followed you. Isn't it a beautiful evening ? "

" Do you mean to say that you followed me, Mr Seldon ! "

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"I do. I hope that I have done no harm. What I have to speak of is important, and must be my excuse."

"I think no excuse sufficient for such ungentlemanly conduct."

Her frosty reception benumbed him.

"I'm really very sorry you should look at the matter like that."

She detected chagrin and disappointment in his tone, but, suspecting the reason for his action, was not inclined to be gracious:

"You really don't think I can accept your apology! Out of business hours my time is my own; and your proceeding looks very much like spying."

The word annoyed him, and he bridled:

"That is too bad of you! I've never been guilty of such a thing, and I have too much respect for you to condescend to such mean work. You do me an injustice, Miss Woodhams; and I think that if you had any idea of what I wish to say you would not have hurt my feelings by such a remark."

"Perhaps you had better not say it. I'm going back now. If you care to walk with me you may—only walk quickly, please."

He took this as an expression of repentance, and, turning, he strode with her in silence.

He found it difficult to begin a conversation that would ultimately lead to the subject in his mind, and, awkwardly, he twiddled his stick as he walked. Charity, fearing the revelation before they reached the busier streets of the town, kept him to the pace and opened an assault to prevent his attack:

"I called on Jenny's mother yesterday to inquire how the poor girl was."

It was an unfortunate subject for him, and he met the onset feebly:

"I hope you found her better."

"I'm sorry to say that I did not see her. Her mother told me that she was ill, and had been sent away to the country for a few weeks."

He preserved the pause, considering if this was an opening for his delivery. Then he spoke:

"Poor girl! I am really very sorry for her. I daresay that you blame me, Miss Woodhams, for casting her over; but I could not help myself. I saw you, and I learned to love you. I knew then that I had made a frightful mistake."

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I am to be pitied ; but it was better than making her miserable for life. I could not help loving you ; that is why I followed you to-night—to tell you about it. I have had a letter from a brother of mine who has a store in Cape Town. He wishes me to join him in the business. He is doing well. I have saved a little money ; and he offers to take me in as partner. I have thought of going out to him as it may be my chance. If I go I shall want to marry first ; and if I can marry a woman who understands the drapery so much the better. Will you be that woman ? I love you. Do pity me and give me some sort of hope if you cannot say Yes at once."

She had prepared her answer before he proffered his request. She gave it promptly :

"Certainly not ! I cannot allow you to talk to me like this, Mr Seldon."

"That must not be your answer. Good God ! For near four mortal months I have loved you, and you have been indifferent to my feelings, though you must have seen how things were. You have trifled with me and snubbed me ; I can't and won't stand it any longer ! I have waited to speak with the love for you burning me that I could cry out with the pain of it ! Don't walk so quickly, please ; I have come to speak to you now, and I will speak to you !"

At the word he seized her arm with a detaining hand. Love from him was a matter for her contempt : it singed her self-pride, revolted her feelings ; and quick to decide upon her line of action she stepped a pace from where he stood. Her figure tightened, but she addressed him almost in an everyday tone :

"You honour me, Mr Seldon, by what you have said ; but I am very sorry to say that the honour is thrown away. I can only respect your feelings ; I can never marry you—that is impossible ! Jenny is the girl you should have stuck to, and I still hope that you will make up your little difference with her. I think we had better not go back together."

He had braced himself to take her answer ; and his determination was to struggle for something better than the bitter pill she had given him :

"I'll never take that answer from you ! You don't know what love is ! I did not until I met you. I thought that I loved Jenny Cole—I did love her, but it was not love like this. Oh, Charity, you don't know what you do in refusing me ! You are wrecking a man's life. What will your life be when you remember that ? My God ! I'm pitiable !"

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He was pitiable, and to see him so was painful to her. The necessity for persistence in her refusal pained her, too.

"You are only suffering what Jenny Cole has had to suffer—what she is probably suffering now. Be the man, Mr Seldon. Make it up with Jenny, marry her and take her with you to South Africa. I'll say good-night now."

"You shall not go until you have heard me! You think I ought to marry Jenny Cole. I could never marry her: she is always ill. No damaged goods for me! You are my sort. Why do you refuse me? We have a splendid future before us! My brother is much older than me—he has no family—his business is a big one! It may be all mine some day—all ours! Why do you refuse? Are you engaged to somebody else?"

"No."

"Then why do you say 'No' to me? You can't refuse!"

She could not tell the truth to hurt him; but she must say something:

"I am not worthy enough—not suitable."

"What! not fine lady enough?"

[If annoyance at his stupidity and persistence had allowed she would have laughed in his face.

"Worthy has many meanings."

"You mean that you are too good for a shopkeeper's wife?"

"That is your way of putting it, Mr Seldon."

Knowledge of the truth was a mixture of anger and disappointment—anger predominating. He was the uproused British lion; his tail had been trodden on! He was looked down upon, was made a sport! He boiled, was a cauldron, and his rage was sickening.

"What! You insult me, you fine lady with your damned airs! You don't think a shopkeeper good enough for you, and yet you come into a shop and take a place among the lowest of the shop-people! Who are you, I should like to know, that has the cheek to give yourself airs above your betters? You are very little better than a junior apprentice, and you think yourself better than the best of us! I wonder you condescend to speak to Mr Mason, although you condescend to take his cash! What is it? Twelve pounds a year? When are you going to keep your carriage and pair? Some day, perhaps, you'll drive it up to Masons' and expect me to open the door to you! Ho! ho! we'll see! A carriage and pair on the savings of twelve pounds a year! How are you

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going to do it ? Good God ! you're marvellous !—but I tell you what, Jenny Cole's a queen to you ! ”

Anger worked to passion allowed him no further breath, and he had to pause. Charity had gone white under the tornado of insult, and a sarcasm was ready to loose itself from her tongue. Pride gave her a cooler moment, and she turned her back and walked from him.

How she loathed the low fellow and his vulgar speech ! How she had demeaned herself in listening so long ! Her anger was hard to swallow ; her contempt was extreme. She felt hatred ; and it took some time to bring her medley of feelings from boiling to the simmer. By a striving with thought she brought it so at last, and contempt only remained. Contempt may succeed hatred ; forgetfulness of the object despised is the superlative of revenge. Her object should be to forget this man.

On the Parade the state of a town clock frightened her to a quickening of pace : it was five minutes past ten, and after the time of the closing hour of the shop-house. The streets were becoming quiet, a cab passed her rapidly driven, and with alarm she broke into a run.

She arrived at Masons' in a condition of breathlessness. A cab was moving from the entrance, and as she passed within her surprise was great on observing Mr Seldon standing behind the door in the act of locking it. He looked beyond her, with set features :

“ You are late, Miss Woodhams. You know it is against the rules of the house. I shall record a fine against you.”

The briskly driven cab was brought to her mind ; and as she passed the man with a scornful lifting aside of her skirt, the temptation to shoot was not to be denied :

“ You are a cad ! ”

She did not hear his reply, but strode to her room with face aflame. He should suffer for this even if she had to tell Mr Mason.

She was long in regaining calmness. To questions on her breaking of the house rule of punctuality she gave indifferent excuse ; and while she took off her hat one of her bedroom companions handed her a letter that had come by the evening post.

“ I brought it up as I thought you might not get it until the morning. It looks like a man's writing on the envelope.”

“ Thank you, Miss Rose.”

She glanced at the direction. The writing was not known to her, and she sat on her bed to make the discovery of the

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sender. Glancing at the end of the written sheet she saw it signed: "Yours very sincerely, GEORGE GRAHAM."

Her feelings were still too disturbed to allow room for surprise. She read the letter:

"DEAR MISS WOODHAMS,—I shall consider it a kindness if you will see me for a few minutes to-morrow evening. Please don't send a refusal. I shall be near the main entrance of the Dome at half-past eight, *in any case*."

Her mood, so soon after her experience of Mr Seldon's vulgarity, was for keeping the appointment. Without speculation she promptly decided to go.

Miss Rose's curious eyes were upon her as she lifted her own from the letter.

"Only a letter from a friend, Miss Rose. I'm much obliged to you for bringing it up."

"A gentleman friend?"

"Yes."

"I did not know that you had a young man, Miss Woodhams."

"I have not. This gentleman is only a friend."

Miss Rose looked dubious, and she conveyed doubt in a monosyllabic "Oh!"

"Yes; and now I'm going to undress. I'm very tired."

Mr Seldon's proposal of marriage, though utterly repugnant to her by reason of the manner of man who had made it, and the vulgar scene that had followed, was pleasing enough to Charity's vanity. Reflectively she gathered up her tresses for the toilet of the pillow. Her bedroom companions were settling to sleep; and, standing before the glass, she regarded herself attentively. This kind of egoism was part of her nature; and she paused in the comb-work to fall in love with her reflection.

She stood, now, cool enough to take eminent satisfaction in the view of her personal charms. A woman such as she should realise a high price in the marriage market. A whey-faced shop-assistant, who murdered the language without the least compunction, and with the utmost complacency, was not price enough for her. She had done well in refusing him. Nature would have revenged such a union that, in the mating of the unequal, would have been sin against her laws, a violation that too often meant scandalous sins and society punishments.

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She was not without a certain regret at the earnestness of Mr Seldon's passion, which, in the exhibition of its early stages, she had regarded as a mere summer fever due to the influence of her personality, and conceivable by reason of his character as a light-o'-love. Now his dismissal of Jenny Cole, and his ardent wooing of that evening proved that that passion was a graver affair, and for this reason she regretted it.

In other ways life with Mr Seldon would have been an impossible thing. She was a woman who preferred the scent of the boudoir to the smell of the shop. In marriage her desire was for the best; no second or third best man could give her happiness; such a possession, on the other hand, would mean a life misery. Her craving was for a luxurious life; vulgarity she abhorred, she had witnessed its coarseness to-night. Mediocrity in anything she would struggle above, and the low tastes of Goths and Vandals should never mar her palate.

In the disturbed state of her mind she found sleep difficult to woo. Speculation on the reason of the letter that had come to her, and the events of the earlier evening, kept desired unconsciousness at bay, and she lay restless under the shroud of darkness. The insults of that vulgar man burned in her blood. Reflection on that, and on the cause for the letter excited her brain and led to tossings of body. Considering her attitude to the man who had wooed so fiercely, and who had ultimately served her so mean a trick, she gave herself congratulation. She was determined on her course of action for the morrow. She would carry the fine to Mr Mason himself, quietly deliver herself of her opinion of Mr Seldon, and proffer her notice of terminating her connection with the firm. Until the coming of that day Mr Seldon should be ignored; she would know how to meet any attempts at persecution on his part, a course of action towards herself which she decided that he would certainly adopt.

Among the foreshadowed events of the morrow she took some thought for the reason of Mr Graham's letter. Consideration gave her no satisfaction. She could only imagine that probably it might mean that he intended to offer her some tangible reward for her service in saving his life. If this proved to be so she would know how to meet it.

Thinking thus she hardly realised that a light sleep had come upon her, for her mind continued in the same path of thought until the texture of night wore thin at the windows, and dawn crept into the room like a laggard.

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At breakfast she forbade her glance to wander in the direction of Mr Seldon's place. He came to her as she was entering the shop.

"I have decided not to fine you, Miss Woodhams."

"I don't thank you. You are neglecting your duty."

"My duty is my own affair; you are not here to criticise that."

She would not enter into a conversation, but, without stopping to speak, continued her way to the upstairs department. She decided that he had some ulterior motive in suppressing the fine. At anyrate she would not demean herself by referring his conduct to Mr Mason until he gave a violent sign of his intention to continue the war that his vulgar action of the night before had intimated was between them. Otherwise, as woman to man, she felt his equal, and would fight her battle without the aid of outside auxiliary.

XI

CHARITY was a late arrival at the tryst, and she proffered George Graham a light-hearted apology for having kept him waiting ten minutes beyond the hour he had suggested. There had been a purpose in her delay : nothing more important than a determination on her part not to appear too anxious to fall in with his proposal. She was not altogether comfortable in mind at the appointment, but, considering that he was meeting her as an English gentleman meets a lady he respects, she was satisfied by his very action of greeting to imagine herself in that polite company to which she considered herself entitled and fitted.

"I hardly like to ask you to walk in the streets and talk with me, Miss Woodhams. There is a concert in the Dome. Would you care to go there with me?"

She noticed that he wore evening dress under a light overcoat, and she knew that it would be ridiculous to go with him dressed as she was. Further, as the impropriety of accepting such an invitation was patent to her, she suspected that he made the suggestion with no serious belief that she would accept it.

"No, thank you, Mr Graham. If you have anything to say to me I think we had better walk."

"I have much to say ; and, to tell you the truth, I hardly know how to say it."

She exhibited some facial confusion ; her heart beat, and she quickened to the finger tips, but she dared not have confessed the reason to herself. He was talking again :

"You will see that I am placed in a somewhat awkward position, Miss Woodhams. My father wishes me to find you out and bring you to the house for a reason I hardly like to name."

She was pale as she guessed the point to which he was leading. Still, it would be kind to help him. She proffered assistance :

"You may tell me."

"I am afraid you will be angry. My father is really actuated by the best motives, and I hope you will remember that.

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He is anxious to offer you some tangible proof of our gratitude for the signal service you rendered me the other week, and he has asked me to use every endeavour to discover you and request you to see him at his house."

"I could neither accept such an offer, nor could I go to your house to receive his thanks. I hope that you will persuade him to let the matter drop. It would be a kindness to me."

"I felt sure, from what I have learned of you, that you would not agree. But won't you come to the house as a friend? My father would be most pleased, and I have no mother to pay a ceremonial call. You can dispense with ceremony?"

"You have not been making inquiries about me?"

"Indeed, no!"

"You spoke as if you knew more of me than I am aware you do."

"Yes; I have heard something. We have an old servant, Mrs Dean, our housekeeper, who knows the mother of a friend of yours."

A movement of her eyebrows denoted her surprise.

"A friend of mine?"

"Yes. Your friend's mother is named Mrs Cole. Women will gossip."

Charity's face was ruddy.

"And she has told your housekeeper something concerning her daughter and myself?"

"A great deal, apparently. You know what gossips are."

"But how was your housekeeper to know that you and I are acquainted?"

"She doesn't know. Mrs Dean nursed me in my petticoat age. She rattles and tells me more about her personal affairs than I ought to know. She asked me if I could do anything for Mrs Cole's husband, who is out of work, and who is a good Conservative."

"I hope you will be able to; the family is poor."

"I have arranged something of a temporary nature: he will assist my agent for a few months."

Charity's woman's curiosity was at a point:

"And you have heard nothing good about me?"

"I have learnt for a fact what I had already suspected, that you are a lady by birth and education."

"And that I am a terrible flirt, and make eyes at shop-walkers, rob girls of their sweethearts, and other outrageous things!" Her laughter rippled.

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"I have heard something about one of the shop-gentlemen, whose affections you are said to have alienated. Of course, I don't believe a word of it."

"But you don't know me!"

"You look too proud to marry a shopman."

"I am too proud to marry a shopman of Mr Seldon's stamp. He has so pestered me with his flames that I positively hate the sight of a fire!"

She laughed again; and was aware of a certain meanness in confirming the report of Mr Seldon's attitude towards her to one who was almost a stranger. But the desire to be thought well of merited consideration, and she took no blame for her action. She continued:

"But as I am going to leave Brighton shortly I shall not be troubled with his attentions much longer."

She was looking at his face, and saw him flush.

"You must not do that!"

"Yes, I must. I'm getting tired of the place."

"I hope you don't mean it."

"It can make no difference to you."

"It would make much difference."

She flushed in her turn.

"You can have no real desire to know me—knowing my position here."

"Your position makes no difference to me, and I have strong hope of becoming better acquainted with you. Are you not comfortable at Masons'?"

"I am very comfortable."

"Then why go?"

"I dislike Mr Seldon, for one thing—but he's going to South Africa." She was immediately aware that she had not meant to tell him this. "And——"

"Yes?"

"It is awkward for me to meet you after what has happened."

"If that is all I'll keep out of your way—for a time."

"Oh, don't do that!"

She blushed, not intending to have said so much.

"I didn't mean to say that!"

"I hope you did mean it."

Again her colour flickered.

"And you will not go?"

"Well——"

"Say you will not go."

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"I can't promise. I think you have no right to ask."

"Of course I have no right, but it would please me very much to know that you had altered your mind."

"It would seem as if I had done it on your account."

"To no one but to me."

"What could I think of myself for doing such a thing for one of whom I know so little?"

"If you stay you may know me better."

The conversation flattered her: she was gay, laughter came easily. The dallying with a pretty girl pleased him. He continued:

"Will you promise?"

"Let me think about it."

"Promise now."

"No, I must think."

"Well, I'll agree to allow that if you'll meet me and give me your answer to-morrow."

She consented with a little fluttering laugh.

By an exercise of the art of careful questioning he obtained a bare outline of the monotony of her home life, which, with partial truth, she gave as her reason for deserting it, and he thought her a girl of pluck, adding:

"You have already proved that."

She answered candidly:

"I must not claim pluck of deliberate aforethought, but I believe that I would do many rash things on impulse, except, perhaps, nurse a case of small-pox. That requires real, deliberate bravery."

"You are mistaken in saying that your pluck is due to impulse. You have proved that it is deliberate by leaving home to earn your living. That must have required considerable thought."

"I yearned for the world outside the village. I do not think you can call that pluck."

"The deliberate action that made you take the plunge was certainly pluck."

"I believe that it was instinct—something akin to the instinct of birds that drives them to migrate at certain seasons."

The stillness of quiet ways, a pleasure in each other's society bred and fostered an impulse to exchange mutual confidences. It suddenly struck her that hitherto he had been the confidant, and, declaring that it was unfair to expect her to say more of herself without an exchange, she began to speak to him of

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himself. Laughingly he declared that he was a conventional man, still engaged in spelling out his career, and with no personal history to give interest to another ; but when she reminded him that she already knew that he was intended for the public service the conversation about himself became free. She said that she observed in him a man of ambition, and at once she became enthusiastic :

" I have often wished I were a man ; men are able to do things that women can only think about. Men have also a far better time than women because they may do things that are forbidden to us. I'd give half my life to live a man's life the other half."

" A man's life has its penalties."

" So has all pleasure ; and to have ambition and be able to attain it is the best of all pleasures. We women are victims to social and moral codes that have no existence in a man's life."

He looked at her sharply. She felt called upon to answer the look :

" Don't you think I am an extraordinary sort of person ? "

" Well—er——"

" I think you ought clearly to understand my character. You may not be so anxious to meet me when you do."

" But it is by meeting you frequently that I shall the sooner understand it. You'll see me often ? "

" I can't promise that ; but I'll see you sometimes."

" How often ? "

" I'd rather not say."

" Well, if you won't promise, I'll trust to happy chance. Where do you generally walk ? "

She saw his point, let fly another laugh, and blushed prettily.

" Sometimes on the parades, sometimes in the country ; it depends on my humour."

" Well, when you are walking on the parades or in the country you must not be surprised if you meet me."

She had promised him that she would reconsider her decision to leave Brighton. She gave it no serious thought : her mind was made up before he left her. Brighton was the gayest, brightest spot in the universe ! She hummed brisk tunes in thinking of its delights and her tongue ran upon laughter. She could not leave the sea wherein she was accustomed to bathe ; it was difficult to get situations, and, if she left Masons', she might have to accept a position in an

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inland town. Besides, the advantages of being attached to a high-class business firm, such as Masons', were all on her side. As for Mr Seldon she would tolerate him until the day came for his departure.

Thus she reviewed her surroundings. No suggestion by heart or mind would make her believe that the meeting with Mr Graham in any way affected her reflections. Yet an impartial reasoning must have convinced her of this. Vistas of the future opened to her mental view. She seemed to see the attainment of many things desired. The world was no longer a dungeon : there were chances of scenes of change and excitement, potential opportunities for being the object of admiration. Life was already beginning to be a romance ; and all this was due to an hour's lively conversation with a well-bred, good-looking young man !

She looked back to the shackled freedom and beggary of her old home. If it had been wrong of her to go against her mother's wishes in leaving home, she felt that the sin was worth any regret she might have for it, for she was satisfied that she was walking to where the sun was about to rise rosily on her pathway in life.

Her thoughts dwelt on George Graham. He was the only man whose face, figure, and bearing had ever made any deep impression on her. At the vision she had such a longing that her very arms ached for him. Longing was so palpably astir that she could not sleep, but must remain awake listening to the strategical plans of love, her heart eager to overflow.

Reviewing in her bed the conversation of the evening, she wondered if, in her pleasure of the hour of trifling with Mr Graham, she had not allowed herself to part too easily with that reserve which, she was bound to confess, she should have held to in her conversation with him. Her mind was disturbed to reflect that he might even now be thinking that she was of the class of women who promptly succumb to the blandishments of any man who cares to set himself to the task of conquering them. Arguing in this fashion she concluded that she had given her promise to meet him again with too great a show of willingness, and she blushed in the darkness at the thought. The suggestion gave her such discomfort that she could not sleep for hours, and she decided that her only chance of erasing the supposed impression lay in sending him a polite excuse next day saying that she could not keep the promised appointment.

The note was sent ; and with the idea of self-discipline she

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determined to remain indoors that evening instead of taking the usual walk, which might lead to meeting him. She took up a novel to distract her mind, but found it impossible to read. For an hour she struggled with the book. It was useless ; she found herself unable to concentrate her mind on the printed page, and she decided to walk along the sea front.

As she rapidly dressed herself she knew that this giving way was mere weakness ; but the decision was made and she felt impotent to revoke it. She went to the Parade, listened to the band, and returned to Masons' at the closing hour. There had been no sign of Mr Graham, and it was evident that he had accepted the excuse conveyed in her note. She went to bed sick at heart, but with the hope that the morning's post would bring a few lines from him.

It did not, and she passed a forenoon of misery. With no mental combating she decided to go out as soon as the shop was closed, on the hoped-for chance of meeting him.

A letter, bearing a London post-mark, was handed to her after dinner. She recognised Mr Graham's writing. She tore it open in secret, and was elated to find a request to meet him that evening. He had been called to London on business, but was returning that afternoon, and he hoped she would not disappoint him.

Additional care was given to her toilet for the walk. She put on a hat of Tuscan straw, trimmed with coloured ribbons, which she bought that afternoon. She determined to meet him with feelings well under control ; and it was with considerable annoyance, therefore, that she found herself unable to keep back the traitor scarlet that came to her face directly she observed him.

This unwilling exhibition of feeling caused her to adopt a somewhat artificial constraint in the opening conversation. It did not pass unnoticed, and he endeavoured to counteract her reserve by an equally palpable artificial gaiety. She responded badly ; for the time she had lost her self-confidence, and the consciousness of this detracted from the pleasure of the meeting.

" I have been to London, Miss Woodhams, where I spent half-an-hour in Bond Street looking at the shops. Aren't you surprised to learn that I have such a feminine weakness ? "

" I don't think so : I really believe that men admire good shops as much as women do. "

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"I think that the Bond Street shops must be the finest in the world; don't you?"

"I can't say; I have never been to London."

He showed slight surprise.

"Well, you are to be envied, for you have a pleasure in store."

"I have often wanted to go. I think that I must spend a part of my holiday there."

"You must indeed. Do you know that when in Bond Street this morning I could not resist the temptation of entering a jeweller's shop and buying this."

He drew a small case from his pocket and held it out to her. Her looks sparkled curiosity, and he watched her face before opening the case. It contained a lady's watch—a golden trinket delicately wrought.

"What a beautiful watch!"

"I am glad you admire it. I want you to look inside the case. Let me open it for you."

"Why, it is engraved!"

"Can you read it?"

He struck a match and held it close to the open watch. She read:

C. W. from G. G.

In memory of July 5th, 19—.

Charity almost let the trinket fall:

"No! no! it is not for me! I could not take it."

"I shall feel very hurt if you don't."

"But I said I would take no reward."

"It is not a reward; it is only a memento."

The beautiful thing dazzled her; she saw that the case was designed with tiny jewels, and her answer was feeble:

"I don't think I ought to take it."

"Let me have it a moment."

He drew a second small packet from his pocket, and unfolded a long thin gold chain, which he hooked to the ring of the watch. Parting the loop of the chain, he gracefully placed it over her neck, leaving the trinket dangling in front of her.

"Now, if ever you mention it to me again, or attempt to thank me, I shall take a terrible revenge by telling my father that I have found you out. There! No thanks, please."

"But——"

She turned soft eyes upon him, and he met the glance with

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his own keen gaze. She saw something in his eyes that caused her pulses to pound, and she shrank away from him with a quick, unlasting dread. Immediately this momentary feeling was succeeded by a sensation of gladness; yet the instant suspicion of its existence caused a flooding of blood into her face, which was painful to her to exhibit. Neither spoke. Love has a silent language of its own, as satisfactory as eloquent speech, and at this moment their hearts understood what their tongues dare not frame. Half-an-hour later he left her outside Masons' shop.

Charity had done so little in the discipline of suppressing the signs of her emotions that when the Miss Vineys from her village chanced to call at Masons' for the purpose of introducing feminine fashions into Halnaker her agitation was such that she reddened, paled, and slightly trembled. The visitors, who had not seen her crossing the ground-floor shop, having purchased ribbons and feathers, inquired for the mantle department.

Charity's confusion was observed by Mr Seldon, in whom mean spirit burned. He called upon her to conduct the ladies upstairs.

The Miss Vineys turned towards her, and she watched the dawn of surprise in each face. She turned her own face away before they were able to decide upon a manner to adopt to her, and, in a clear voice, while her agitation abated, requested them to follow her.

While she mounted she was dimly conscious of the mute arrangement of an understanding between the sisters following, as to the manner in which they were to treat her. She thought to gain an inkling of this at the turn of the stairs, and she glanced at their faces sideways. They were formal, and stone set.

Her proud blood surged. Quick, spiteful thought came: "Here is vinegar that men may be thankful to have escaped." She went for Miss Spinnet, whose duty as senior saleswoman it was to attend them, relieved to get away from their immediate presence.

A minute later Miss Spinnet called her name:

"I want you to try on some coats, so that these ladies may judge of the style."

Here was degradation for one of high blood! She was doomed to show shame to inferior-born women from her own village: daughters of her father's landlord, women who considered themselves socially above her, and who had been

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accustomed to mark it ; women she despised. She found it difficult to control her emotions as, one after another, she placed coats and capes upon her shoulders, and paraded before them, her eyes always directed forward. The elder Miss Viney addressed Miss Spinnet :

"Will you ask your assistant to kindly try on the fawn coat again ?"

Charity thought that she discovered a malicious timbre in the word "assistant," but she kept her wrath stoppered, and paraded again. Miss Viney was not satisfied with the garment :

"I don't think I like it so well as the last. Will your assistant try that on again, please ?"

In a flash Charity had her revenge. It was off her tongue before she had time to weigh it :

"I don't think that this one would suit *Madam's* complexion so well."

The emphasis was gently done, and Miss Spinnet wondered at the growing crimson on her customer's grey face. She decided that the lady was supersensitive on the point of her complexion, and strove to set her at ease :

"I think that it will suit *Madam* remarkably well. Perhaps *Madam* will try it on ?"

Charity walked away exulting in the triumph of a petty feminine victory ; and presently had the satisfaction of seeing the Miss Vineys march stiffly from the showroom, like a pair of Brahma hens. Miss Spinnet gave her instructions to pack up the two coats they had purchased, and address them to Miss Viney at one of the local hotels :

"They have no regular account with us, so you had better mark the parcel 'pay on delivery,' and enclose the bill."

"They are quite safe for the money."

"Do you know them ?"

"Yes ; they come from a place near my home. Their father is a big pot there."

"They didn't speak to you ?"

"Oh dear, no ; they wouldn't think of speaking to a mere shop-girl if they could help it, although they made their money in the wholesale ironmongery business, and the shop-girl's ancestors came over with the Conqueror."

"Well, they've got no taste on earth. The eldest looks about forty, and she's bought a coat suitable for a girl of eighteen."

"Poor thing ! She belongs to the class of women

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who are never reconciled to growing old. She always tries to appear younger than she really is. It's all in the game."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, Miss Viney is like a good many other women who are anxious to be married. She finds her personal attractions going, so she bedecks and beflowes what remain in the hope that she may fascinate someone before they wither altogether."

"Oh!"

Miss Spinnet turned to move away, and Charity wondered if she had in any way made a personal application of her remarks. Having that fear she endeavoured to deviate her friend's possible thought:

"You see, Miss Spinnet, the poor Viney girls belong to the swarm of idle women that is as great as was the plague of flies. I pity them, but I think they are to be blamed as well. Why don't they go out and work?—or emigrate? They'd have a chance of marriage then. I remember Miss Viney when she was a bright, smiling girl. Now I regard her as a hopeless case. She and her sister are rooted to the soil of the village as if they were mangel-wurzels."

"If I had plenty of money I don't think I'd go out to earn my living. My father was a draper, and I used to assist in his business. He failed shortly before he died. I kept house for my brothers until they married, and as they are too poor themselves to help me I had to come here. I was nearly thirty when our home was broken up."

"So you sacrificed yourself to brothers who cannot repay you. That was noble! I believe that many girls sacrifice themselves to brothers and parents, under the impression that it is their duty."

Charity saw that she had aroused thought in the mind of Miss Spinnet. She observed her reflect before answering:

"I think there is something in what you say, Miss Woodhams."

"I know there is. I am quite convinced that the woman who goes out into the world has the best change of marriage. That is one reason why I left home."

Miss Spinnet felt and looked astonishment. Charity laughed lightly:

"Don't you agree with me?"

"Yes—I suppose so."

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"Well, that is my desire also, and I have the courage to say it. I intend to be married."

"You talk as if you were engaged already."

Charity blushed, and Miss Spinnet took the sign for a modest, maidenly assent of the fact. The girl saw no reason for a denial. The elder woman's interest was sharpened:

"You surprise me. You have not mentioned it before."

"I may be able to surprise you still more. Guess his name."

"I couldn't. Is it anyone in the shop?"

"Oh dear no! I should marry a shopman only as a last resource. He is Mr George Graham, of Graham's Bank."

Miss Spinnet was surprised indeed. Charity, thinking that she might have said too much, sought to protect herself:

"But you mustn't tell anyone, please—not yet. I did not intend to tell anyone—not even you—only somehow the conversation led to it, and it came out."

"Well, I must congratulate you. I suppose you'll be leaving Masons' now."

"No, not at present; I must wait until things are arranged first."

"You are very lucky."

"I am."

"Do you think he'll stick to you?"

"Of course he will."

Miss Spinnet appeared reflective. At length she spoke:

"I'll tell you what makes me ask that. I was once engaged myself."

"Yes?"

"To a clerk in a lawyer's office. He gave me up when my father failed in business."

"Then he was not worthy of you."

"Hush! He's dead now."

"And a——"

Charity stopped, paused, and turned the conversation from Miss Spinnet's personal affairs:

"You see I have my own views on the question of the unmarried woman."

"I'm afraid that the problem of the unmarried woman is a great one."

"It is the greatest of all social problems."

Miss Spinnet sighed.

"And when the Miss Vineys came in I felt ashamed of

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myself for being seen by them as a shop-assistant. Now I feel their superior, and can have pity for their hopeless condition."

In a view of her impetuous indiscretion in allowing her elder to believe an intimate flirtation to be an engagement Charity did not think of the effect of the conversation on poor Miss Spinnet, who concluded it with the suggestion that she should make up Miss Viney's parcel.

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XII

HER walk with George Graham that evening was one of many similar meetings extending over the next few weeks. He asked for her company on some of the weekly half-holidays, and he even took her for short boating excursions. This constant communion had led to a decided familiarity: she played with him felinely. Her artless bent for a gallopade suited his humour when in her society, and he welcomed the feline playfulness. No word of love had yet been spoken, but their relationship was now a flirtation of pure honey to both participants. So wide apart were their respective social positions, so close were their sympathies, that there was no knowing how the flirtation would end. Who could say that the woman was not playing for a stake? or that the man was not an unresisting victim in the game? Certain it was that in that game she had more to win than he; he had more to sacrifice.

It could not be denied that, when in the presence of this girl, George Graham found himself under a spell that was not without its dangers for a young man whose career was mapped among high altitudes. At times he imagined this splendid example of womanhood as a figure in the society to which he had entry. The rapture of her face, her brilliant eyes, her great vivacity of spirits, enchanted him and made him feel an enthusiasm for her that amounted to more than keen admiration. He thought her gay, lively, delightful. He was overpowered by the flash and dazzle of her talk, and if Delilah had not yet cut off his hair she was come very near to it.

Lately the friendship had become so rapidly intimate that Charity, in her moments of reflection, came to wonder at her own audacity in expressing to him those views of human conduct which, a few months ago, she might have hesitated before confiding to her most intimate female friends. Yet at the time of conversation he was so free, so easy of manner, and yet so gentlemanly, that it appeared one of the most natural things in life to give him her opinion of certain of life's phases. He was surprised at her broadness of view,

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the wideness of reading, and the logical reasoning by which she had evidently arrived at her conclusions. Such a woman was fit to mate with the man of advanced opinions, and his only regret on his own account lay in the present social position of one of such enviable mental capacities.

¶ They had walked to wooded places, and neither appeared to have the wish to return to the town. The moon had risen with grave majesty, and now sat on the top of the trees, pausing before the solemn march through heaven. Their conversation bordered on flirtation, and each thought the pleasure of it mutual. He led her to talk of herself, and, without reluctance now, she gave a careful outline of her earlier life, and some account of her family. Her ambitions she kept to herself. She told him of her dislike of the country life, and her preference for the bustle of the town. He would have led her to speak of things akin to love, but courage deserted him at the point, and, for the moment, he kept his feelings locked up. Nevertheless he could not resist a stronger impulse to lead the conversation to this channel. He had given an opinion to the effect that true love was no fiery thing: after the earlier passion, he said, it was a passive thing, something like to the sober mutual feeling existing between couples long married.

She did not agree:

"To my mind true lovers are always passionate. Love is never calm; in its quietest phases it is always unsatisfied; in its strongest it is passion intensified to frenzy. A tame love would never satisfy me; love that is tame is without piquancy—is a dull thing. No; passion is the soul of love."

"I am afraid that you would be hard to please."

"I really believe it! I should prefer a lover with a spice of wickedness in him. I admire the man who will go to the dickens for a woman; such a man has good in him."

"But you would not have a rake for a lover?"

"Oh no! though I believe that many women if not rakes at heart prefer the men who are."

He laughed.

"I don't pretend to offer an opinion; though, speaking as a man, I believe that the rakish woman is the woman a man is not impartial to."

"Yes; it may seem a deplorable fact, and I can only account for it by the desire which possesses the average human being to struggle against a tame life."

"A 'tame' life would never satisfy you?"

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"No; indeed it would not. I must have plenty of excitement. That is another reason why I left my home in the country. I have a morbid dread of depression; and to my mind a country life is the quintessence of depression."

The moon was well on the march, and the stars trembled in the presence of its majesty. Where the trees were thin, moonlight was spread over the earth in pools. It was a night to make lovers, and its influence was strong upon both. Electrical sensations flickered through him; he felt her magnetism course through body and blood to his sentient finger tips. In the soft white light she saw his profile clean cut, like that of Alexander on a cameo; and to walk with him thus was to walk with a young Greek god in a world of dreams.

In a quiet moment he fell to reflection. This was not a woman to whom the breathing of an Arcadian passion would be acceptable. Her action in leaving her village home, the exhibition of certain phases of her character satisfied him on that point. Love offered to her must be a practical, if flameful, thing. He looked at her. Her well-made, simple blue dress, designed for walking, suited her dignity of person admirably. He tried to fancy her attired in clouds of multi-coloured fabrics—chiffons, laces, or soft muslins, and thought that dressed thus she would have no additional charms.

"You are very quiet, Mr Graham."

Without warning, and with sudden impulse, he kissed her.

His action was unexpected, and her exclamation, given in a tone of fright, showed it:

"Oh!"

The blood had fled from her cheeks, and he could see that she trembled with agitation. The ungentlemanly manner of his act immediately struck him, and his apology was profuse:

"I beg your pardon, Charity—Miss Woodhams; I did not know what I was doing for the moment. I could not help myself—forgive me—I love you!"

She drew away from him with a little fear contending with her deeper emotions. The hot blood worked vividly under her skin, and she felt her love for him struggling with the rush of her feelings. She turned soft, affrighted eyes on him, but the transient sensation of fear gave way to a delicious joy that she was conscious of, deep down in her heart. His love saw it, and he took her hand, which fluttered in his own like a newly netted bird. He spoke to give her courage:

"Am I pardoned, Charity?"

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" You should not have done that."

" Am I pardoned ? "

Her answer was faintly spoken, and he observed the muscles of her face twitch as she gave it :

" Yes."

" And you love me ? "

Her thumping heart almost strangled the word :

" Y—yes."

" Be brave, my girl."

" I am very foolish."

" You are very lovable ! " He placed his arm about her.

She took the words as a draught of wine. They glowed inwardly, like champagne, warming the blood.

" And you will kiss me, Charity ? "

She held up her encrimsoned face, panting slightly. In the shivering ecstasy of that long first reciprocated kiss she felt as though her whole soul were being drawn from her by his lips, and to hide the shame of her face she pressed it to his shoulder.

XIII

THE aloe, of all plant life, may stand emblem of exclusiveness : it flowers once in a generation, and for the rest is thorny and unapproachable. In such wise Charity had bloomed to advantage among her fellow-workers at Masons' ; her contact with George Graham had the effect of hedging her round with exclusiveness. She was not easy to approach. Ancestral pride aroused became paramount, she was above the shop, and above shop society. "Airs and graces," shop society called it ; to Charity it was knowledge of the superiority of her birth and breeding.

Mr Seldon ignored her. "He is shy of my bite," she thought, and rejoiced at it. She felt satisfied that he would trouble her no more with a recital of his ardours, and she told herself that the day of his farewell could not long be distant.

News of its near approach reached her one morning when it became the general topic of conversation among the assistants at Masons'. Discussion took the form of conversation of regret among those shop-ladies who believed that Mr Seldon had sometimes shown them slight favours.

"Well, I for one am sorry he's going."

"I bet that the man who takes his place will be a frump with a bald head."

"That's all you know about it, Miss Rose ; Mr Adams is going to be promoted."

"Who told you that ?"

"I heard Miss Richards and Miss Spinnet talking, and Miss Richards said she got it from Mr Mason himself."

"Well, I'm sorry for Mr Adams ; he's only a boy—not even a moustache ! What is Masons' coming to, I'd like to know ? Catch me taking orders from a boy younger than myself !"

"Masons' are doing that to save in the salary list ; the firm isn't making half the money it used to make, if you ask me."

"Well, all I can say is I am sorry Mr Seldon's going."

"You've said that before, Miss Jacberns. One would think you'd fallen in love with him."

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Miss Jacberns blushed, and spoke in hasty confusion :

" Me ?—not me ! "

" Well, there's nothing to blush for then. Miss Woodhams might have had him if she hadn't been a fool. Anybody could see that."

" She thinks he isn't good enough for her ; you can tell that by her manner. I've kept my eyes open ; she's aiming at higher game."

" What do you know about it, Miss Rose ? "

" Only that I gave her a letter that came for her one evening a few weeks ago. It was in a man's writing."

" Yes ? "

" And Carrie Smith met her one evening last week in company with Mr Graham."

" Do you mean the Mr Graham that's going into Parliament ? "

" Yes. Carrie Smith says that he was talking to her quite intimately, and she looked as pleased as a lamb with two tails."

" That's why she's been so hoity-toity lately."

" Of course it is ! I knew the reason all along."

The short succeeding silence was reflective. Miss Jacberns disturbed it :

" It looks fishy, if you ask me ! "

" That's what I thought. Gentlemen like him don't want shop-girls for any good. Why, his father's one of the richest men in Brighton, and the son could marry a title if he wanted to."

" But that wouldn't give him a title."

" Wouldn't it ! Well, it would give him the chance of hobnobbing with the nobility ; and that's more than he'd come by if he married Charity Woodhams."

" Well, you may guess what he's up to."

" I'm surprised Miss Woodhams doesn't see it."

" Of course she sees it. She knows a thing or two. She's not the first girl who's led a man on and caught him in the end."

This dialogue bred an atmosphere of constraint, which Charity was not slow to observe. Far from suspecting the real cause, she sought the reason for it in her own conduct, and, under reflection, decided that the course she had taken in keeping aloof during the past few days was an ill-advised one. She had allowed herself to be so concentrated in her thoughts of George that, lost in dreams of her own

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happiness, she did not miss that society of her companions, whose alienation her own exclusiveness was the chief cause. Still viewing her destiny as the wife of young Graham she now determined to mark a certain distance, but to do so with more geniality of manner.

About this time she wrote to her sister Faith, to convey the news of her engagement :

" You know, Old Girl, I have always had Ambition with a big A, and now I think that some good fortune is coming to at least one member of that undeservedly ill-served family known as Woodhams. Not that I think that it has been altogether unlucky, for you have had the good fortune to marry a good man who is able to give you all you require—and you thoroughly deserve it, too! George has Ambition—also with a capital letter—as well. He is a candidate for parliamentary honours. What do you think of that! I am sure he will do something great. Oh, to be a man and do something great! His father is a wealthy banker here, although I am told that the family is almost plebeian. I whisper this to you. I don't intend to make inquiries. George is well-bred, and passably good-looking. He has not yet told his father of our engagement; he says that he is a curious man to deal with, and he must wait for a favourable opportunity. I suspect that George fancies that his father would make an objection on account of my position here; that is the kind of thing a Pleb would do. Still, as George says, birth tells more than money in the long run, after all; and a little reasonable argument should work wonders with his father. No ring yet; that is to come when our engagement is approved by the Old Boy. I declined it until then.

" The strangest part of this story is the manner of my introduction to George. You, of course, wonder how it could have come about. I am going to keep you at the point of curiosity until I see you, which will be soon now, as I intend to accept your invitation *at last*, and spend most of my holiday with you. I shall have a fortnight. I am writing to mother. Won't she be surprised?

" A hundred kisses for the chicks, the same to you, and one only for Tom. I can't spare more now for any other man."

To her mother she wrote with more reserve. True, she was tempted to exhibit a triumphant note on account of the fulfilment of her predictions, but she felt that to show it

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would not be kind. Her letter, therefore, was more in the nature of a bare statement of fact, tinged with a proper maidenly reserve. She told of her intention of spending the greater part of her holiday with Faith, but promised to conclude it at home. "And don't let me arrive to find you pale and worn with overwork. I have prepared a lecture on the Sin of Slavery, with a Special Manifestation to Macerated Mammas, entirely for your benefit, dear mother, and I promise to deliver it with terrible emphasis if I find that you have disobeyed me!"

During an evening walk, Charity, with the divination of her sex, perceived that George had matter to disburden. She coaxed the subject from him.

"You are going away for a fortnight, Charity, and I want you to make me a promise before you go."

"Yes, dear?"

"I want you to promise to leave Masons'."

"But——"

"You see that by so doing you will strengthen our position with my father. While you are away I intend to tell him of our engagement. He is a proud man, and——"

"And he would not like to think that his son was engaged to be married to a shop-assistant. Isn't that it?"

"Well, since you put it like that——"

Charity laughed.

"Shop is a vulgar word for refined ears; but you must see, George, that I cannot very well leave Masons' until our engagement is announced. It is my living, and——"

"But surely you have confidence in me! If you leave Masons' at once nothing need be said to my father of your having been there, for the present."

"Well, I'll talk it over with my sister, if you don't mind."

That was the understanding at their parting.

XIV

RUMOUR is an unregenerate sneak, often a libeller, ever a maker of mischief. It came to the ears of John Graham, and whispered that his son was gallivanting with a female shop-assistant, and making scandal for town talk. This was a thing to tell against one seeking public honours: one owed consideration to one's position, and the follies of the Green Age were not expected of a young blood with a mind set on high place in the world. But Rumour sometimes made mistakes, John Graham was pleased to reflect. There would be no harm in making an inquiry.

The conversation opened after dinner over the port. John Graham was old-fashioned enough to drink port after dinner, and his port had age and individuality.

"I want to talk to you about a matter of some importance, George."

The son's face asked the question. John Graham's throat appeared irritated by the last sip. He cleared it as preface:

"I want to know if there is anything in the tales that are going about you and a girl—a shop-assistant, or something of the kind?"

George was aware that the quicker beating of his heart had sent red blood to his face. It etiolated to normal hue as he spoke:

"I don't know what you have heard, father. I am certainly on intimate terms with a lady—in fact she is the lady who pulled me out of the sea."

John Graham's eyebrows mounted his forehead in astonishment. George's thought was to give him chance to collect himself. He handled the decanter.

"Will you have another glass, father?"

"I thought you told me that you had been unable to find her."

"That was true when last you asked me. As a matter of fact I only discovered her by accident. She is very sensitive on the point of the rescue—quite a lady. It would have been impossible to have offered her any reward. In fact she

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anticipated that, and it was one reason why she declined to make herself known."

"Then what is her position, and where does she live?"

"She is a lady by birth and breeding; she lives at Masons' drapery establishment, where she assists in the mantle department."

"And you reward her by falling in love with her!"

"I have fallen in love with her, but if that is a reward it is a pretty poor one."

Within himself John Graham declined to believe that his son was victim to a genuine and lasting love. George was as human as other young men. It might be an infatuation, but whatever it was his son's position in the public eye demanded a warning from him. He assumed a judex air of composure.

"Well! well! young men will be young men, and that generally means that they are young fools. When I was your age, George, I was not a public character; therefore it was not so necessary for me to be circumspect. Prudence is absolutely essential to you. The d——d Radical party have as many spies as the Crown has lawyers. Let them catch you tripping, and good-bye to Parliament!"

"I have no fear of spies, father. My intentions to Miss Woodhams are absolutely honourable, and I fear nothing my enemies, political or otherwise, may be pleased to say."

"Honourable, sir! What do you mean?"

"I mean that I intend to marry her."

His son's plain statement came with the force of a bolt hurled from high Olympus. John Graham gasped as if he had been hit in the chest, and his face bleached suddenly with a terrific rage, as soon as his mind was sufficiently recovered from the shock to be fully capable of grasping the measure of what he had heard. Then he spluttered as the volcano of rage endeavoured to burst all at once from the confines of his bosom: he was a human crater in eruption. He emphasised his anger by a thump on the table that caused a profound sensation among the wineglasses.

"Do you mean to deliberately tell me that you have made a proposal of marriage to a shop-girl! Why, the thing is as good as a play! Are you playing with me, or are you mad?"

"A play is sometimes an earnest thing to those engaged in it, father. I am in cool earnest. Miss Woodhams comes of good stock—hers is a noble family."

"A member of a noble family in a shop!"

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This playing on "shop" caused the young man to wince. It irritated his venom, but he had pride, and his face put on armour to reply:

"Yes, sir. She comes of one of the oldest families in the county. Though her family is poor she is in a shop by her own free will. She can leave when she likes. She went there, not because her father could not keep her—but because she wished to be independent, and gain first-hand knowledge of the world. She knows very few people in Brighton; so her present position need not be detrimental to mine."

"But she took advantage of it to bait her hook for the biggest fish in the sea! You say she has no money. Understand that I have other ideas for you. I expect you to marry a woman of position; one that will do credit to your own."

"I am perfectly sure that if you met Charity Woodhams, father, you would like her. She has everything you could wish for your son's wife—except money."

"And for that very reason she would never have my approval as your wife. I am perfectly willing to reward her handsomely for saving your life. I'll give you a blank cheque; I'll start her in business on her own account, but I'll never agree to you marrying her. Look here, George, you are a man of the world, with as much sense as most. I have given you every advantage in the way of education, and it is my ambition to see you safely started on your career before my time comes. Some day you'll have all I've got. You have money and influence, and you are in the best society in the town. It would be madness to throw away your chances! Don't bring sorrow on me in my declining years."

Young Graham was touched. It needed the pause of a moment's thought to make a plan against this mode of attack. He waited while thought came, and with that curious psychological desire to seize at trifles in supreme moments he mechanically toyed with his empty wineglass.

"God forbid that I should cause you sorrow, father. You have given me credit for ordinary common sense, and I ask you to continue in that belief. But it is one of the maxims of life, sanctioned by custom and religious precepts, that all parents are discerning and their offspring shortsighted and irrational; yet, whatever you think, I can only repeat that I love Charity Woodhams as much as any man can love any woman. She is the woman of my life. Do not be hard on me, father—you can't be hard!"

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In his turn the old man became aware of the soft spot in his own heart. But the quick recollection of the indignity that his pride would suffer by such a marriage as his son proposed brought the heat of anger back:

"I strongly disapprove of what I am sure is a mad infatuation on your part, George, and it shall never have my approval! Is this what I get for all I have done for you? You appear to me to be without the ordinary pride of a gentleman. Other mistakes can be forgiven, but a matrimonial slip never is. Society never overlooks that. You ought to be ashamed for even associating with a person in that girl's position!"

George fired in his turn, but, masterly, he seemed to curb himself as one curbs a rearing horse:

"Society has its own decalogue, I know; but you forget that the husband has the power to raise his wife to his own social level. The best proof that I shall give that I am not ashamed of Charity Woodhams will be when I marry her."

"Then I tell you plainly and emphatically that if you persist in running after that girl I'll not only cut you off with a shilling, but I'll have nothing whatever to do with the furtherance of your career! Unless you come to my way of thinking it's good-bye to a position in Parliament. Now think *that* over at your leisure. I give you a week in which to make up your mind."

He strode from the room, his face still deformed with fury, crammed a hat on his head, and went to cool his heat by intercourse with Admiral Sheepshanks.

He arrived at his friend's hotel, hot in body, cool in mind. The Admiral was alone with the newspaper and his tobacco: he was smoking a clay cutty. He often declared that a tendency towards tobacco indicated a turn for affairs. He proved it by reference to Lord Clarendon, who made the Foreign Office reek like a cabmen's shelter. "Diplomacy itself is a mere question of tobacco judicially employed upon opposing plenipotentiaries." Brougham knew that, as well as Clarendon. The Admiral never would read Swinburne because someone had told him that the poet had eulogised James the First for having "slit the throat of that blackguard Raleigh." Napoleon was more humbug than hero: he could not smoke. He rejected tobacco for moroseness in St Helena; "Serve him right, too!"

John Graham, in some absence of mind, asked him how he did.

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"If anything I'm dying from too much health. I'm always well, because I was brought up properly."

"I've come for a little practical wisdom, old friend. George has made a fool of himself."

"Money?"

"Worse—woman!"

The Admiral stood up, and posed stiffly, like an exclamation stop, his mouth, for a moment, ajar:

"I hope to God he hasn't got into a scandal! Just think how it would please the opposition!"

"He is in love."

"Worse and worse! I know what being in love means for him: the time that should be given to the Cause will be spent in dancing at the hem of a petticoat, in writing poetry, in windy words, in combing his hair and trying new ties to hypnotise his sweetheart, in sighing and feeling sick in the stomach! The sickening thing about love-making is the lover. Pah!—who is the—person?"

"She is a shop-girl, and——"

"Better than I thought! Come, there's hope. Open your purse wide enough and it's an easy business. He can't seriously intend marrying a shop-girl."

"She's the woman who rescued him from drowning."

The Admiral was surprised, though his words only proved excitement:

"I thought so! I said it would come to this, at the time! She is a designing hussy! I know them! What was she doing on the beach when a man was bathing, I'd like to know?"

"But he'd have been drowned if——"

"Drowned! she should have let him drown! No good'll come of the rescue! I see it all! Is she pretty?"

"I've never seen——"

"Of course she's pretty! He'll marry her, sure as eggs; and as soon as they're married she'll want to go into politics. Women in politics—monstrous! They'll be getting into the House next. Send 'em to the First Lords—the Admiralty's the only place for the political woman, so long as it continues to include civilians and quill drivers! What have you done?"

"I've warned him."

The Sea Dog barked:

"Warned him! warned him! I know your warnings! you try to say Boh! to a goose, but only screw up your lips. Why don't you load your guns with red-hot shot instead of

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soap? Warned, indeed! Adam was warned, but he fell to a woman. You'll have to get rid of her, I tell ye. I see a drama hatching—a woman, a man, and love for the serpent! She'll play the leading part, love'll be the villain, and your son the poor weak fool!"

"I think if we talk of this calmly——"

"Calm, sir! Who says I'm not calm? I'm calm as an unloaded four-point-seven! Let me tell you this: George is ruined as an active politician as soon as he marries. He must learn to discipline himself. It's the bachelor who is the prudent factor in modern civilisation. Look at me! I've refused a hundred times to be wiled into marriage; I've passed a dozen chances of making some woman miserable. George wants discipline, I tell you. Love to public men is like the talk of women—a curse!"

"He'll expect to marry some day; I have ideas for him."

The Admiral threw his pipe into the empty grate:

"Yes, you're always scraping your brains for money. Better marry him to a sack of it! I'm not against marriage—it's necessary for the race; but I'd leave it to business men and unemployed aristocrats who haven't to fight for the good of the country. It disciplines their character, recruits the navy and army, and peoples the Colonies. When public men marry they should retire—otherwise they neglect their wives and cut a figure in the divorce courts."

"He thinks she is a good deal better than he is."

The Sea Dog gave a Pluto-like snort:

"I know; an ass can always find thistles! He's evidently hit deeply; he's coming to believe the popular fallacy that calls women the better half of humanity. Tell him to read Darwin and Schopenhauer."

"I mean in birth—he says she has birth."

The Admiral accepted the statement with reservation:

"A shop-girl?—maybe! A woman always lies when it comes to love-making."

"He makes a point that parents are always right and their children always wrong."

"That's like him. The world will never attain perfection until parents agree to be educated by their children. What did you say?"

"I threatened to disinherit him. I felt the ingratitude after all I have done."

"You did wrong; and you expect too much. Children are never grateful to their parents for what they have done."

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You ought to have found that out long ago. Ingratitude is the ill-begotten child of kind actions and self-sacrifice ; but a threat is near to revenge."

"I had sufficient excuse: he's making a huge blunder."

"Say mistake—it is easier to tolerate; we all make mistakes, blunders are made by the vulgar."

"Call it what you like; to me it is a disaster. I flattered myself that his mind was too well-proportioned to allow him to become a victim to a calamity of this kind."

"Great men haven't well-proportioned minds; nor have great men in embryo. The well-proportioned mind belongs to the mediocrity. George has brains."

John Graham felt his back arch like a cat's:

"I believe he has. I've been proud of him."

"But it's wonderful that a green head should contain brains!"

"I know that. It is difficult to find a young man who is not a fool in the eyes of somebody. He'll grow wiser. I've talked. He listened to what I said."

"And so you still think he retains some sense; you still respect him because he listened to reason, and because he gave you a chance to talk. Words! words! You were always fond of blank cartridge. Your method'll prove about as harmful as a pop-gun. You've been a married man, and don't know the power of women. I've never been married, and I do. He'll never have his senses back unless you get her away. The man who loves a woman never has his senses. That's why I'd rather deal with a drunkard than a lover—he, at least, is sometimes sober."

"How am I to get at her? Women can be evasive."

"Go about the business at once. Go like a crab: go sideways and you'll advance without seeming to do so."

"If she refuses to go?"

"Then there's no hope for him."

John Graham spoke in a sanguine key:

"See him, Admiral. He might jilt her."

"And if he jilted her she'd be as malicious as the devil. The chances are against it; you must get her away."

"I never thought George would disgrace his name."

"His name is his true self. You are right. If he were not a public man I'd say let him marry her: I don't care a dump for social position. But love and State affairs won't mix: they are like oil and water for that. Women have spoilt careers before to-day; they don't understand the life

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of public men. *I'll* talk to him ! We'll hope for an early election—the papers show signs. The sooner he gets into the harness of politics the better.”

“ *I'll*——”

“ You see the girl ! She's proved that she has grit. You'll have your work cut out. I'd like to meet her for five minutes. Time enough for that. What do you think of Cameron's Women's Emigration Bill ? The measure's right enough ; I object to the man. He is a d——d swab, sir ! I know those Radical reformers ! We'd a short way in the navy with men of their stamp.”

XV

WHEN England was designed and a living place was necessary in which to plant the hard-headed of the race—the money-weavers, the bluff, the large-hearted, the uncultured, the genial, the men of worth, the small-refined, the builders and sustainers of the Commerce that has made and upholds England among the nations—God looked to the North, and planned out a wide territory giving room for the development of great industries. This land was called Yorkshire, and in it were placed the greatest of the country's Sons of Trade, with the name of Yorkshiremen.

To the heart of the County of Commerce Charity Woodhams was bound for holiday, brimming with sisterly affection, pleasure anticipated, and pleasant gossip of her new-found wealth in man's love, for her sister's ears. The Colne Valley for summer recreation was an unorthodox taste; but to one newly loved it would have its charms. There would be pleasures of gaiety as well, for Faith's husband was numbered among the Princes of Manufacture, and could be lavish as a prince in spending. Besides, Charity had not seen Faith since the birth of her sister's second baby, and subjects for gossip, accumulated and stored for long months, meant pleasant hours in the corner of the drawing-room, and (the favourite cabinet where intimate women exchange secret femininities) her sister's bedroom.

Faith, bright-eyed and beaming, met her sister in her victoria outside the railway station. She gave the acquired Yorkshire embrace: a hearty kiss on each cheek, and risked the impairment of her handsome summer gown in the ardour of a bear-hug.

"How well you look, dear girl; you seem taller! Never mind your luggage; I have told William to look after it. How many boxes? Only one! But you have a handbag, I see. Truda badly wanted to come to the station to meet her auntie; but I thought we'd have a little talk to ourselves. We can drive home through the park if you are not too tired. Tom is at the warehouse as it's market day. He said that on no

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account was I to bring you to him there, as he would be much too unpresentable. You'll see him at tea-time. You have not told me how your George is, dear."

Charity laughed.

"I've not had time."

"Of course not; how stupid of me! I'm doing all the talking. Now what is he like? I hope you have brought a photograph. You must describe him very minutely. It's so strange to think of you being engaged."

Faith was certainly an attractive woman. As a description the word pretty would not have done justice to her face; to say that it was beautiful would have been to use unnecessary and undeserving hyperbole. One might have thought that ingenuousness somewhat spoilt it, for a little of the facial hauteur of Charity might have been imagined a decided improvement, by adding dignity. Sweetness, honesty, brownness of eyes, hair, and skin one saw at a glance and approved; a certain pensiveness, that a want of something to complete happiness might have dispersed, seemed unnecessarily present.

Charity and her sister reached "The Tower" after an hour's drive, twenty minutes prolonged for the sake of sweet gossip. Tea was served almost immediately in a luxurious drawing-room where wealth was loudly displayed. Across the dome-shaped ceiling were painted flying Cupids with golden wings, the furniture was gilt, there was gilt in the shouting yellow pattern of the wall paper. Faith watched her sister's exploring eyes:

"This room is Tom's own design, Charity."

"My brother-in-law certainly does not keep all his gold in his pockets."

"Don't you like it?"

"Oh—er—yes!"

"I believe you are making fun! Don't you like the walls? Tell me what you think of them—really."

"Well, they remind me of a huge mustard plaster."

"Charity! How absurd you are!"

"I am afraid I am not accustomed to so much splendour. I shall feel that I am dwelling among the glories of Solomon all the time I am here."

"Perhaps you'll have a house like this of your own some day. Your George is rich? You mustn't quite copy us though."

They drank cups of tea, and at seven o'clock high tea followed in the dining-room—a farmer's hot meal of roast

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ducks, hot Yorkshire tea-cakes, currant tea-cakes, jams and preserves, a cake of carraway seeds, a plum cake, and tea in Gargantuan cups with gold rims and handles. A comprehensive glance at the table seemed to satisfy Charity's appetite.

Before they sat down Tom Beaumont entered the room. He was short and obese, and would have looked a typical farmer had he been somewhat taller and worn a check suit and gaiters. As it was, Nature seemed to have marked him out for an apoplectic seizure: he had no neck. It was evident that he was subject to a weakness that could be named at a glance: his face did no credit to either parent: it was a credit to nothing but the bottle of which he drank.

He gave his sister-in-law a hand, moist and flabby, like a dead fish to handle.

"Pleased to see you, Charity."

"Thank you, Tom! I am very glad to visit you."

But Faith thought that her husband's salutation was insufficient:

"You have not congratulated her, Tom."

He bellowed "Eh?" as it were one of Æsop's talking bulls.

"You have not congratulated her on her engagement."

"No more I have, lass. Well, here's to both of ye."

He raised his tea-cup and gulped.

"Thank you for that, captain. I'm sure that I appreciate all your kindness."

Charity had accustomed herself to call her brother-in-law "captain" in mere badinage, there being nothing in his appearance to suggest the term. He thought her thanks demanded a better reason, for a suggestion seemed to occur to him:

"I'll drink your health in better stuff, lass. Reach me the spirit-stand, mother."

Charity noticed that the lurking shadow in her sister's face seemed to become suddenly deepened and pronounced. There was an apparent anxiety in Faith's answer, and a look charged with meaning was flashed to her husband:

"I don't think you really want it, father."

"Nonsense, love; we don't get the opportunity of drinking a young couple's health every day. A taste'll do."

Perhaps to end the incident quickly Faith took the tantalus from the sideboard cupboard, unlocked it, and poured a table-spoonful of whisky into her husband's tea.

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"Now, lass, here's to you both again; and if your husband doesn't drink you'll be a happy woman. Eh, mother?"

Charity again glanced at her sister's face and saw that the shadow there had thinned. She had read the reason for its presence, and she made a successful and infectious attempt at gaiety. She had formerly been accustomed to chaff Tom without incurring his resentment: humour, bordering on rudeness and personality, was appreciated by him, who was blind to the subtlety of quiet innuendo and nice repartee. He suggested plans for the morrow's entertainment:

"You two will want to talk in the morning. Mother can show you the house, while I do a few jobs. After lunch we'll go by train to Fountains Abbey and have tea there. Truda shall come with us."

"That'll be splendid, captain; but I wish you wouldn't say 'lunch': it sounds like bread and cheese! I believe that I'll never reform you."

"I'll say 'dinner' if it pleases you."

"No; 'luncheon' is the word."

"Lord, what it is to be engaged to a Parliament man! I'll warrant you call it plain 'dinner' in your Brighton shop."

"So we do; but you see I have left the shop for a fortnight, and come into Society. I think that I shall spend the time in teaching Faith how to take you in hand to get the best results from you, so that when the time comes for you to be elected mayor of this progressive borough you'll go into office as a model man in all departments."

"Nay, lass; there'll be no mayoralty for me under twenty thousand a year. The mayor of this town has got to spend money, and I've got to work a bit before reaching that figure. Some day I may think about it, if trade improves."

An after-word, in sisterly confidence, discovered to Faith that Charity had learned her secret. She told the story with tears in her voice.

"He is a good husband and father, dear. Drink is his only weakness. The desire for it seems to be growing on him, and I dread to think how it will end. Nothing is too good for me or the children, he gives us all we wish for. He is the kindest of fathers—spoils the children. I have kept this from you and mother, and everyone else, and I have often been thankful that I live so far from you all. I think I should die of shame. I'd give up everything if he were only able to keep from it. He can't help it—I know he can't. He wants to, but I believe it's in his blood. There are hundreds like him."

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Charity asked a question with some anxiety :

"He never treats you badly?"

"Never! He muddles his brain and becomes a log. He is the best of husbands. I'm so afraid for the children."

"What! That he will use them badly?"

"No; he'd never do that. When in his fits his instinct seems to keep him from that. I'm afraid that the disease—I'm sure it's a disease—will break out in them when they get older. His father had it."

"The children will be all right if they are not allowed to touch it."

Faith's reply was fierce :

"They never shall! I pray God to help me to keep it from them. I hope your George——"

"George, I am thankful to say, can control himself. Everybody has trouble of some sort. I expect I sha'n't go free."

"Marriage has its risks."

"I am willing to take them. Was Tom like this before you married him?"

"He was not so bad."

"But you married him, although you knew it, dear."

"I loved him."

So will women ever risk a life of pain for love of men. It was Charity's thought; and she would do the same. She knew it. It was human nature, and human nature is stronger than pain as it is stronger than death.

For the first eight days of her holiday Charity's brother-in-law was normal and cheerful. He spent time and money on her pleasures. They heard grand opera, gave picnics, paid social calls, and entertained at supper-parties. If their pleasures were often vulgar they were all enjoyable, and Charity entered whole-heartedly into them and made many friends among these people of hospitable hearts. George had written almost every day; she had sent him long replies, warm with her love for him, and she came to look upon these days as among the happiest of her life.

It was not without regret that she viewed the approach of the day when she would have to leave her sister to spend the remainder of her holiday with her mother. The time was very near at hand, when one evening her brother-in-law returned from his office at an earlier hour than usual. He came to the house in a cab. Faith had heard the noise of wheels in the drive and Charity saw her, pale-faced, rush to the front

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door. From the top of the stairs she heard her sister in quavering voice order the parlourmaid to fetch the gardener, and she divined the reason.

She descended to the drawing-room and shut the door. In a few minutes she heard the sound of heavy-booted men slowly ascending the stairs as though they bore a burden. Her thought was to go to her sister, but there might be pain for Faith in that. She remained where she was, deep in reverie, until she heard the men descend the stairs, and the cab drive away. Soon after her sister entered the room. Her face was set white, but there was no sign of tears in her eyes.

"Tom has had another fit. I've got him to bed—he'll sleep it off. Did you ring for tea?"

"No, I forgot it."

"Ring now, dear; I have a headache, a cup will do both of us good."

Faith sat in silence while the tea was brought. Charity poured it out, and silence continued to reign while they drank. Charity glanced at her sister's face, still alabaster, and impulsively leaving her seat, went to Faith and wound her arms around her neck. Faith's features relaxed, worked, and suppressed grief burst out in silent weeping.

Charity kissed the weeper's cheeks and spoke comfortingly. Faith was difficult to console:

"But the disgrace—before the servants."

"It is bad, dearest, I know; but you can, no doubt, trust them."

"I'm afraid of them. That's why I keep them. Cook is a bad-tempered woman and would have gone long ago. I keep her and give her more than she is worth because I am afraid she will talk."

Charity wondered if the inducements had been sufficient to prevent her sister's servants from keeping a lock on wagging tongues. She referred to her brother-in-law:

"When will he wake up?"

"He'll sleep until late in the morning."

"And what will he say then?"

"He'll say nothing. He'll be thoroughly ashamed of himself, especially as you are in the house. But he'll say nothing. He never does."

During the evening Charity endeavoured to create a cheerful atmosphere for the benefit of her sister. It was a hard task. She led the conversation to their home, and the lighter re-

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miniscences of their childhood days, but her personal trouble, and the approaching departure of Charity, weighed upon Faith and made cheerful response difficult. Suddenly she spoke :

"I wish you'd leave Brighton, Charity, and come and live with me. Tom and I have often talked about it, and he is as anxious for you to live with us as I am."

How such an arrangement would affect herself immediately occurred to Charity :

"I'm afraid that would be difficult to arrange—George might have something to say."

"But surely he would not object until the time for your wedding?"

Charity reflected. Her trouble made her sister a little selfish she thought. She could understand that. Such an arrangement might mean some time from George. She would want to see him—she was longing to see him now. But perhaps George would not object to her absence as she would be relieved of her connection with Masons'. She thought that she might mention the matter when she wrote to him on the morrow ; or she would go and see him and talk it over after she had visited her mother.

A knock at the drawing-room door diverted the current of her thoughts. A maid entered with a salver. It held a letter for Charity. She glanced at the envelope and saw George's handwriting.

"Here's a letter from George, Faith. I think I'll ask him, if you don't mind. I feel sure that he won't object. I'll go upstairs and read this and come back in a minute."

She always read George's letters in the privacy of her own room, a habit contracted at Masons' and almost insensibly continued in the house of her sister.

Half-an-hour dragged and Charity had not returned to the drawing-room. Faith, lost in meditation, was suddenly aroused to curiosity, then sprang to immediate alarm as she became aware of the tale of the clock. She rose from her seat, and went upstairs to Charity's bedroom.

She signalled at the door for permission to enter, but there was no answer to her summons and she turned the handle and entered the room. Charity was stretched across the bed.

"Charity! Whatever is the matter?"

There was no answer. Charity's face was buried in the pillow, the edge of which she appeared to be gripping with her teeth. A white sheet of paper fluttered to the carpet

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as Faith stepped to her side and slightly shook her by the shoulder.

"What is the matter, Charity? Aren't you well?"

The girl slowly sat up, her face white as milk. A bead of blood was on her lower lip as though she had bitten it:

"I hate all men!"

Her words were intense, and her face was set in passionate lines. Her sister's alarm increased:

"Tell me what has happened."

She searched gropingly for the letter, found it on the floor and thrust it at Faith:

"There is a beautiful love letter! Read it, and you will know how much I hate men!"

She stood up and paced with strides marking agitation. Faith sat on the bed and read:

"MY DEAREST CHARITY,—This morning I had a terrible interview with my father—the second, in fact. It was, as you may guess, about our engagement. Rumours had already reached him and before I told him all I found him armed against us. I explained everything. He was most unkind and we had words. We both lost temper and he told me plainly that I should have to choose between you and the career he had already arranged for me; and that if I decided for the former he would never see me again. Temper excuses much, and I left him in the hope that he would be more amenable when he was more sober-minded. I talked with him again. It was useless: he was and is obdurate.

"This letter must cause you much pain, dearest, as it gives me much pain to write. I leave the matter with you. I would not willingly give you up—you must know that, but the election cannot be far off, perhaps a year, perhaps only months. I shall work hard in the borough until then; I have my meetings. After the election my father may give his consent—he *must* if I am elected. Shall we not meet again until then? I leave the decision with you, willing to accept your choice. It is a great grief to me, but you will, I am sure, see and appreciate the position. I shall anxiously await your reply. Bear up; matters will straighten, and then—our happiness! Bless you, dearest Charity. Only believe in me.
G."

Faith laid the letter down, a great pity in her heart:

"My poor, poor girl!"

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" 'Poor,' you call me, Faith! I'm no poorer than you. I have a scoundrel for a lover, you have a drunkard for a husband! We are both served alike—nay, you are served the worse! You are tied to yours; I am not tied to mine, thank God! Do you wonder that I hate men! I hate George Graham; in three words, I hate him! Give me the letter. Where is it? "

The words were those of a great and sudden temper; so was her action. She snatched the letter, tore it to a hundred fragments, and threw them from her contemptuously. They fluttered to the floor as a small shower of snow.

Only hell had rage like hers. In her blindness she had given her sister painful words and Faith, hurt, but trusting to talk with her when she was calmer, left the room.

Charity sat for hours frozen up in her thoughts, feeding with them her rage to fatness. How contemptible he was!—and how unworthy! She felt she would like to strike him! In the intensity of her rage she wrote him a letter full of contempt, a basilisk for withering. Then she tore it up. She did not know what to do, or how to reply to him. Miserable tears of rage started to her eyes to be immediately burnt up by the heat of her anger. With an action of impetuosity she seized her hat, placed it on her head, and savagely ran the pin into it so carelessly that she pricked her scalp. Then opening the door she rapidly descended the stairs, passed across the hall and went out into the night.

She inquired for the nearest telegraph office, and, entering, addressed a telegram to "George Graham, Esquire," spelling the courtesy title in full. Beneath it she added her message:

"Please yourself. I leave it entirely to you. You must act for the best.—C."

Pride had come to her now and she took strength from it. She left the post-office and walked to keep pace with the rapid flow of her thoughts. She had esteem for herself at this moment; she felt that she had done the right thing. She walked on, pale, quivering, and almost rejoicing at the hate which strove to embrace all the sex male. They were contemptible, selfish—her mind dwelt for a moment on her brother-in-law—beasts! She was eaten up with rage and hate, and she walked on like a madwoman newly escaped from an asylum.

Anger was dumb and bitter now, and for miles she walked, until she heard the melancholy booming of a clock in a near

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steeple. She stood still to listen, her knees trembling. Eleven struck, she counted the strokes aloud, then paused as if she waited for a twelfth. She heard nothing more than the dying note of the last boom on the air. Then she turned and found the street deserted, and, as if her mind were in reality unhinged, she filled the darkness with a peal of loud, long laughter.

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XVI

GREAT mental disturbance will sometimes affect the physical condition. From rage and mortification Charity sank to the reaction of misery and despondency. George Graham wrote in answer to her telegram, imploring a reply by letter. Her answer was the return of his presents without a line. Then she collapsed and kept to her bed.

It was impossible for her to visit her mother ; it was equally impossible for her to return to Masons'. She thought of the latter with a shudder, and, after consultation, Faith wrote to both saying that her sister was ill, then, risking Charity's disapproval, called in the family doctor.

Masons' replied to gather an idea of how long Miss Woodhams was likely to be absent. They were busy, and other assistants were awaiting their turn for holiday. The letter was read to Charity, who declared she would never return to Brighton. Faith sent a month's salary in lieu of the formal term of notice, and decided within herself that her sister must now be adopted as a member of her ménage.

Charity occupied her bed for nearly a week. She had gone thin, listless, and had become uninterested in events. It was plain that she brooded ; she thought of Jenny Cole. The doctor declared that it would be better for her if she got up and walked abroad. She declined, and her sister began to wonder how long this half-torpor would last.

One afternoon Faith returned from paying social calls. She had news, and went to give it to Charity, with her hat on : " I have been to see Mrs Quarumby-Smith. She is going to Switzerland for a month, and is advertising for a companion for the trip—someone to talk to more than anything else, I expect ; she is a great talker. I thought of you, and said that I might be able to find someone for her. Did I do right ? "

" You should not have done that. I have no desire to go to Switzerland."

Faith looked disappointed, but her answer was somewhat sharply spoken :

" Nonsense, Charity ! It would do you all the good in the

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world. What is the use of moping in bed ? There are plenty of men about. You'd travel like a lady ; and Mrs Quarmby-Smith knows a lot of people, though she is vulgar. Besides, you have often wished to travel, and now's your chance. You would be silly to throw it away. You'd come back here when you returned."

"I've changed my mind. Besides, such a trip would be impossible with a vulgar woman. Fancy, she began to call me 'Charity, love,' before I had known her half-an-hour !"

Faith, with an impatient gesture, left the room.

Next morning, to her surprise, Charity came down to breakfast. Her brother-in-law, who generally joined them when the meal was half completed, had not yet left his bedroom. There was an evident note of cheerfulness in Charity's tone as she addressed her sister :

"I have been considering what you said to me last night, Faith, dear. If you like I will call on Mrs Quarmby-Smith. Perhaps I will go with her, after all. I think I've been selfish, and a bit of a nuisance to you all lately, and probably a change would bring me to my senses."

"You are sure to find Mrs Quarmby-Smith about four. I'm glad you've changed your mind—it's the best thing you could do."

A feather-bed in a frock is a fit metaphor for Mrs Quarmby-Smith. She was coarse of flesh, had good nature and money, but few h's, though at times when she recognised the slip she would immediately correct it. In her widowhood she had relapsed into worldliness, and the wisdom of the average woman. Her income was four thousand pounds a year, she kept three servants ; and when Charity called she was ironing dusters in the kitchen. To her visitor, who had met her once before, she was promptly affectionate :

"I generally go abroad about this time, love. I believe in travel : it develops the mind. Now there's your sister, Mrs B., I'm surprised she don't go, with all their money. She sticks to Blackpool and 'Arrogate—Harrogate. There's never any accounting for tastes. September is good for Switzerland—the rush is over. Between you and me and the door-post I hate goin' to places when the rush is on—you meet so many common people. I'm goin' with a party—not Cooks'. I'm delighted you're comin'. I've always felt the need of someone to travel with, ever since my poor 'usband died—kind of chaperong like. I met him in Paris, love ; that's where he courted me. He was a decent enough man,

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though my folks did say as I threw myself away by marryin' him. That's because I was his second. I'd only just left a boardin' school at Scarborough when I met 'im—him. It was a first-class school—half the aristocracy have been there, and no end of money it cost my poor father—what with the piano and French and German and ridin'. I was said to have a good seat on a 'orse—horse; our ridin' master had been a lieutenant in the dragoons. Come upstairs, love, and let me show you my new gown."

Mrs Quarmby-Smith was obsessed by the subject of women's dress; her array was often as gaudy as that of the peacock, and in matters of intellect she had a peacock's brains. Charity, invited to the inspection of her wardrobe, dutifully exclaimed admiration.

"There's a gown to catch a 'usband, love! No tellin' what it may do in Switzerland! It cost me thirty guineas—every penny! The lace is real—every bit of it! Now I must show you my sables. The shopman told me that he hadn't sold a finer set to Lady Carmichael herself. My 'usband bought them in Bond Street, and gave two hundred guineas for them. Nothing was too good for me, love."

She produced furs that would have added dignity to a Russian princess. Charity, imagining the rotund body of Mrs Quarmby-Smith clad in these outward signs of a fat purse shuddered internally. To her friend she spoke in such terms of admiration that delighted Mrs Quarmby-Smith drew forth her complete store of hats, bonnets, gowns, and underclothes until the bed, chairs, and ottoman held a display that would have done credit to any draper's emporium.

"You are very fortunate to possess so many nice things, Mrs Quarmby-Smith."

"I've always had clothes as good as these, love—ever since I was eighteen. Now if you like I'll make you a present of this cream cashmere tea-gown. It will fit you nicely if you have it altered. It cost me ten pounds last season. I'll do it up into a parcel for you. You must try it on first and then come and have a talk with me in the kitchen while I make the bread. We can arrange our trip and 'ave a nice cup of tea."

In endeavouring to make a delicate refusal of the gift Charity had an embarrassing moment, and it was only because she saw that Mrs Quarmby-Smith's feelings were really hurt that she agreed to accept the present. When she took her leave an hour later it was with studied forgetfulness that she left the gown behind.

XVII

IN the high Alps of the Bernese Oberland summer was lingering in passage, and the favour of fine days still continued. The prime morning air was thrillingly cool, as the breath of mountain-top snow filled the valleys before the sun became genial. In this early time of day clouds hung as fabulous prospects in high heaven, or trooped in long columns across its plains. Dawn discovered the throats of the mountains muffled in mists, and the whole landscape shivering with a grey face.

From the door of the Eiger Hotel, lateral to the gun-shot length of the street of Grindelwald, stepped Charity Woodhams good-morning in her port. A glimpse of early light on the white head of mighty Eiger had tempted her from her bed at a premature awakening, while the sleepy village was yet trembling to wakefulness. On the low verandah of the hotel she looked up, and gazed at a spectacle to smite her dumb. Day stood tiptoe to enter at the gates of the east, and colours were stirring from sleep. The morning yawned; and she beheld a marvellous revelation in the arch of heaven. At the base of the mountains night was in motion to flee; already it had fled from the summits, gold-tipped with pure light. Virgin white swiftly succeeded gold as the sun reached over the heads of the mountains, filled the hollow of the sky and washed the valley of night. The sun had come, and coming galloped rapidly, leaping valleys and skipping along mountain-sides; while down the village street came a peasant driving a cow with a tinkling bell.

Turning to look about her the girl noticed a man standing at the gaze, in the pose of a statue poetically sculptured. Half-hidden by a pillar of the verandah she looked at him to satisfy her woman's curiosity. She observed that he was young—perhaps thirty—of Panim features; tall, slender and graceful in outline. One could imagine him wearing the toga with dignity; or, with appropriate dress and posing, he might have stood as the living model for Holiday's Dante.

A minuter examining curiosity would have revealed smaller details. A clean-shaven face allowed a tolerably easy reading

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of the young man's general character. He stood on the verandah without hat, his hair brushed back to show a high forehead. His nose, curved and prominent, might have been the sign of firmness of character had not the mouth been in disaccord. This, with a short upper lip, was weak, pretty and girlish. His brown, deep-set eyes suggested the habit of thought, his slender hands a freedom from hard manual labour. Melancholy's sign manual was stamped on his bearing: he looked like a man who had passions and griefs; one who bore a present burden on his shoulders, as Samson with the gates of Gaza. The whole effect proposed that the presence of sunshine in his life would have improved him. Charity thought him decidedly interesting.

While she looked she heard him sigh, and saw him turn and enter the hotel, without, apparently, having noticed her.

She descended the steps to the street, crossed the fields, and went to the bridge to watch Black Lüttschine playing roughly on the gambol between its banks.

Seated on a low parapet she fell easily to reverie. In solitude she felt made for fearfully planned scenes. The river rushed on in aquatic recalcitration; and her thoughts pursued their way, splashing like its waters. They dwelt on George Graham, and a fog of intolerable melancholy overcame her. Mneme quickened her visibly, and she could have wept; not altogether for her rejected love—it was strange that this was so—but now, after a three weeks' interval, a talking with her heart showed no great damage. It was on account of her pride, which had been humbled to earth, that she could have dissolved; and at thought of that she stood up and walked back to the hotel, with quick pace, at a fume.

She found a dozen visitors at breakfast in the *salle-à-manger*. Mrs Quarmby-Smith was not among them, but Charity noticed the young man who had taken her attention when she watched the sunrise, eating slowly, as if he were in meditation on each mouthful. She took a place opposite him, and asked a waitress to bring her coffee.

He lifted his eyes at the sound of her voice, and immediately lowered them again to his plate. In contradistinction to the scrambling movements of those visitors who were hurrying through breakfast with the thought of the day's excursion in mind his eating, to Charity, seemed irritatingly deliberate. When everybody was talking to his neighbour she thought it curious that her *vis-à-vis* companion should keep strict silence, and she suddenly determined to call his attention:

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"May I trouble you to pass the sugar?"

"I beg your pardon."

He handed her the basin, and returned to silence.

She thought his action discouraging, but presently essayed another attempt:

"What did you think of the sunrise?"

He raised his eyes and looked full into her face:

"It was magnificent! Did you see it?"

"I was there—on the verandah standing near you. You could not have seen me surely?"

"I'm afraid I did not."

"I ought to have coughed perhaps?"

He seemed slightly surprised at the remark, but gave her an answer:

"I daresay I should not have noticed it if you had: I was too absorbed."

"May I ask if you have been long in Switzerland?"

"A week; I have another fortnight here."

"A week in these mountains! How perfectly delightful! We—a friend and I—only came yesterday."

He did not reply, and she thought him taken captive by a sudden bashfulness. She allowed the pause, then made another effort to engage him:

"I suppose you are going on an excursion to-day?"

"I go with the hotel party to the Bäregg Hut."

"Then you will be of our party; we go as well."

"Yes?"

"My friend and I, I mean."

"Oh!"

The result of her attempt to interest him did not altogether please Charity. Nevertheless she had a feminine satisfaction in learning that she would see more of him as the day advanced. Her curiosity desired to be fed, and she resolved to thaw him, even if she had to exercise her woman's wiles in the process.

Some minutes later her attention was drawn to Mrs Quarmby-Smith, who entered the room, and as she seated herself at the table the young man rose and left, with a slight bow to Charity. The unconsidered action of his departure slightly annoyed the girl, she could not have told why, and she determined on a feminine revenge.

In less than an hour the party of nearly twenty persons stood outside the hotel for the start of the climb to the Bäregg. Some two or three guides moved among them offering to carry

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the impedimenta of coats and mackintoshes. The stranger man stood slightly apart from the gossipers in small talk. Charity was without an alpenstock and she determined to ask Solitary to help her in the selection of one from the bundle offered for sale outside the hotel. She approached him:

"Do you mind helping me to choose an alpenstock? I really know nothing about them."

"Nor do I; but if you care to trust to my want of knowledge I shall be pleased."

They chose a light bamboo staff with a spike at one end. Almost immediately he left her. Charity rejoined Mrs Quarmby-Smith in the full determination of finding out all she could about this elusive being who refused to be beguiled. She had a mental plan by the operation of which she proposed he should succumb.

"I wonder who that quiet man is who helped me to choose this alpenstock just now? Did you notice him, Mrs Quarmby-Smith? Do you think we can find out who he is?"

"Which young man do you mean, love? I daresay I can tell you something about him. I've been very busy talkin' to people since we came, and the courier told me a good deal—a most informin' man. We've two doctors in the party, for which I'm very glad: you never know what may happen. That clean-shaven man talkin' to those two ladies is one of them—one of the ladies is his wife. His name is Bethuen—Dr Bethuen. The one over there—oh, where is he? I do hope he's comin'! Oh, there he is! the man with eyeglasses and a brown moustache: he also is a doctor but I forget his name. I'll find out again presently. Then there's a parson, a dull-lookin' man—you find them everywhere; and those three young men in Norfolk suits and Panama hats—I haven't been able to find out who they are, but they look like merchants of some kind, and one I know is a Scotsman by his talk. Then those two young ladies standin' near them, one is a governess; I believe her friend is settin' her cap at that fair young chap; at anyrate——"

"Yes, yes! But what of the gentleman leaning over the verandah railing? He is the one who helped me to choose this."

"Oh, he's a writer—an author or reporter or something. I think he looks like a detective: he's so quiet."

"You don't find detectives in the Alps. Do you know his name?"

"Yes; I saw him take a letter from the rack in the 'all—hall. It's Storm—or some such name beginnin' with S.

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"They're startin' now. Let's keep to the front near the guides."

The party moved off as a flock, walking well together on the roadway, but straggling to a long line at the steep of the mountain. Charity's stranger was well to the front, and soon she recognised the hopelessness of overtaking him unless he paused in the climb. Mrs Quarmby-Smith was continuously complaining of the steepness of the way, and she gladly accepted the aid of a guide, who pushed her from behind until his face ran moisture. Charity now thought it best to remain in the company of her hostess, trusting to be able to interview the stranger at the halt on the mountain top.

Vegetation thinned in the upward march, and the party entered a grim region around which the Bernese mountain giants stood severe in their capes of snow.

The climbers rested for native wine and coffee outside the Bäregg Hut. Charity found her stranger seated on a bench, drinking a glass of wine. She went to him :

" You climb well, Mr Storm."

" Strachan is my name."

" I beg your pardon : I could not have heard it clearly."

She told her own name. He offered to obtain refreshment for her and presently he returned from the hut carrying coffee.

She learned that it was not his intention to cross the Mer de Glace, and immediately she decided to remain behind. It was unnecessary for Charity to use verbal persuasive powers on Mrs Quarmby-Smith to obtain her company, and offer the excuse for her own remaining : that lady, panting painfully in a black silk gown, declared that she could not advance another step. She had made the latter half of the climb roped to a guide, and now she affirmed that the thought of the return journey appalled her. She was never more grateful for her feather bed than she was for the wooden bench at that moment. One, to climb in Switzerland, should have the gymnastic powers of " those mountain things with 'orns " : by which she meant chamois.

They rested an hour ; then the party moved forward to cross the Mer de Glace. Charity turned to Mr Strachan :

" You remain with us ? We shall be five and a guide—two other ladies are not going. Few men can command such an Amazonian guard."

" I crossed the Mer de Glace last week. To-day I prefer to remain. To me this is the best part of the climb."

" Is that your way of making a compliment to your court ? "

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"I was thinking of the view."

"It is splendid, I know, from the top of the path."

She got up to step forward, and her movement suggested his following. They gazed together at a world full of silence—far across the valley to the blue-white snow of sullen peaks. She turned her head slightly to watch his face; he was lost in reverie.

"You are a great admirer of nature, Mr Strachan? Perhaps you paint?—you are an artist?"

"No; though I share the expectations and uncertainties that are the common lot of most painters."

"Expectation and uncertainty are to be counted among the thrills of life. You are related to art in some way?"

"I live on a literary pen: in other words I am an author from choice and a journalist of necessity."

"An author! How interesting! Tell me what you have written."

"I have not published a book yet, but I am writing a poem—a sonnet sequence, and while I work on it journalism keeps me going. But I detest journalism—it is not art." He paused. "It is my object to do more than literary work: I want to make literature."

"And you are getting inspiration from the Alps?"

"I am awed here. Before I came imagination prepared me for much, but not for so much as this. I feel humble. The mightiest feats of man are like the works of ants to this. Men themselves seem ants, a thousand to be crushed with the foot. The right inhabitants of this land should be a race of giants, like the monsters you read of in fables. To me these mountains serve to show the pitiable insignificance of the whole human race."

"And yet men have conquered these mountains—brave men who have risked their lives to climb them."

"Such feats savour of profanity. When I hear that a mountain like the Wetterhorn has taken toll of human life I cannot help but think it just payment for the unholy curiosity that leads men to pry in sacred precincts."

She turned the conversation:

"Where is our guide? Surely he did not go on with the others to the Mer de Glace?"

They had turned about, and were looking above them. The fellow was up the side of the mountain, bending to earth.

"He's gathering edelweiss, Mr Strachan. He told me it was to be found hereabout. I should so like a bunch."

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She spoke meaningly, and he gazed into her eyes comprehending :

"I'll get you some if you like."

He sprang, cat-like, at the mountain-side. She watched him mount, slowly as the slope became steeper. He had almost reached the guide when she called :

"Oh, Mr Strachan, you frighten me ! Come down, please !"

He cried a reply which she did not understand, and she saw him stoop as if to gather from the grass. The guide, higher up, had turned, and was shouting instructions in German.

The closer view of the steep ascent frightened Charity for the young man's safety. She made a trumpet of her hands :

"Come down at once, Mr Strachan, please—please !"

He turned with a shout, and waved something above his head. She saw the guide clamber down to him and watched the man give him assistance in the descent. When they reached the path again Strachan found that she had gone white. He handed her a single blossom :

"Your edelweiss."

She took it from him with thanks, and placed it in the band at her waist. He saw her fingers tremble.

"I am afraid that I have frightened you, Miss Woodhams. There was really no danger."

"It was my fault. The mountain looked awful from below ! I should never have forgiven myself if you had slipped. I shall dream of it ; I'm sure I shall ! What must you think of me, Mr Strachan ?"

He laughed :

"I am no mountaineer, but it seemed so easy to grant your wish that I was tempted to make the scramble. I hope you feel better."

They rejoined the ladies, seated on the bench, and Charity showed the edelweiss without telling the incident of its plucking. A half-hour's rest and they began the return to Grindelwald, Mrs Quarmby-Smith insisting upon being roped for the first half of the descent.

The following day Charity, Mrs Quarmby-Smith and the two ladies who had returned from the Bäregg, claimed rest in the woods through which Lutschine bawled in the chace. Mr Strachan had started early for a solitary climb of the Faulhorn.

For the next fortnight he was the constant companion of their excursions. They joined daily parties to Lauterbrunnen,

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Mürren, the Lake of Thun, Interlaken, Lake Brienz and the Jungfrau.

His reserve once overcome Charity found in him a free and pleasant companion, deep in knowledge of books, and not a little of the world. They talked literature—his favourite topic—and at once she gained his sympathy by an exhibition of her own knowledge of modern and romantic books. In addition to the classics of Romance she had read John Stuart Mill, and among the ancients she had some knowledge of Plato and Aristotle. Her reading he thought catholic, her deductions broad-minded. That was the inevitable conclusion of Charity's most intimate friends. In his presence her nature resumed its empire, and, in light sympathetic talk, the mists of her disappointment vanished, the rigid fences of polite ceremony were uprooted one by one, and a friendly intimacy was established in their place.

She gathered that he had been married, but had recently lost his wife. When he told her that he had written poetry she felt enwrapped in a little breeze of ecstasy, and her enthusiasm pleased him and flattered his vanity. She had gained his respect, and he thought her charming.

XVIII

THUS the commerce of books established a bond between them. Under the sunshine of her presence Strachan was tempted from Somnus' den to bask in the rays of her geniality and good comradeship.

The acquaintanceship had ripened to familiarity of friendship by the end of Charity's second week in the Bernese Oberland. On the forthcoming Monday she and Mrs Quarmby-Smith were to sever connection with the party of tourists with whom they had travelled from England, and take a week at Lucerne on the homeward journey. Mr Strachan proposed to walk thither over the Grosser Scheidegg and the Brünig Pass, and, hearing this, Mrs Quarmby-Smith suggested Charity and herself as the companions of his walk :

"That is, of course, if there are no precipices, Mr Strachan. The climb to the Bäregg frightened me out of my skin ; and I'd see my neck as long as my leg before I'd do it again. How far is it ?"

They might reach Meiringen at the end of the first day—about twenty miles, he thought.

"That settles it ! We'll go by train if there is one, and meet you at the 'otel. My back aches like billy-o with all the walkin' I've done."

Charity seemed so anxious for the walk that Mrs Quarmby-Smith felt that she had been unkind in altering her decision. Looking at the girl's disappointed face she began to waver :

"If you like, Charity, I'll——"

"No, you go by train, and I'll walk with Mr Strachan—that is, if you and he do not object to the arrangement. It will be only for a day. We can all meet at Meiringen, and I can go with you to Lucerne from there. I shall be the only selfish person of the party, for I shall have a companion all the way. What do you think ?"

"I should be pleased for you to go with Mr Strachan, but if an accident happened I could never face your sister. Perhaps you had better come with me, love."

"But——"

Mr Strachan took the reply from Charity's mouth :

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"I'll guarantee to bring her safely to you at Meiringen, Mrs Quarmby-Smith. There is a broad path all the way. No precipices. I've made careful inquiries."

"Well, if you do guarantee——"

"I do."

"If I did not look upon you as a steady goin' sort of young man, Mr Strachan, I should say No."

"But as you do, you consent. I am honoured. We'll join you at dinner at the hotel on Monday evening. It is settled."

Frankly, the proposal was as champagne to Charity's brain: it enlivened her. On Sunday lounging hours and early bedtime prepared them for the walk. The following morning, after seeing Mrs Quarmby-Smith to the railway, the pair took breath for the tramp.

Under a vehement September sun they set out as adventurers, with featherweight steps and the light hearts of mounting larks. Leaving the glaring main road they sat on a bank before the climb. Charity was in conversational humour:

"I never realised the beauty that may be obtained from life until I came to Switzerland, Mr Strachan. This country should breed thinkers and idealists."

"That is a point I have against our own country—there is no room for the thinker and idealist. England is too busy to give time to the poetic side of life, and the thinker and idealist is jeered at for a Utopian—an unpractical fellow. In France, for instance, it is different. That is why France can show the best in most forms of art. One of the objects of life should be the acquisition of the sense of beauty. Without beauty life is flat and humdrum—there is no poetry. It is so in England."

"I agree that we should live for beauty, though at times I have found it hard: the depression of monotony has sometimes smothered it."

"You acknowledge the beauty of these Alps?"

"I do—they are majestic—but since I have been here their beauty for me has been deadened by occasional depression—I should say, by morose reflections. I have felt depression for longer periods in the midst of English rural scenery."

"Perhaps that, in great measure, was due to familiarity."

"I think not; it was due rather to the monotony of life. Nature must have the spice of excitement to satisfy me. You get it here. When I look at these grand mountains I climb them in imagination; I undergo, mentally, all the dangers and difficulties that beset the mountaineer intent upon the

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summit. There is no similar excitement to stimulate the mind in English rural scenery. I have never visited English mountains : that might be different."

"It is temperament. English scenery soothes me ; this awes me and leaves me giddy. I could not climb."

"But you gathered edelweiss at the Bäregg."

"That was different—I speak of mountaineering feats."

The morning animated their blood, and they climbed the slope pantingly, with no breath for further words. Until this revelation of a new land Charity had not viewed inanimate nature with deep observation. Her attention had been for men and women, and her desire for movement in life. Thus she preferred the boiling sea to its placid aspects ; the awfulness of broken cliffs pleased her better than the calm of hills at summer twilight. She sought for thrilling emotions rather than green fields ; and she gained more personal profit from a minute's glance at a glacier than from a ten years' dwelling among the peaceful greenery of an English farm.

At the half-accomplished climb the pair chose a rock for rest, their lungs palpably at bellows work, their eyes ravishing the surrounding beauty. The young man mopped his streaming face :

"That was a back-breaker. How well you climb !"

"We've a bad half to conquer before we reach the top."

"Do you feel it ?"

"Only the throbbing of a pulse here." She indicated the small of her back.

"You'll be able to hold out ?"

"Pluck would carry me anywhere. I enjoy this."

He offered her his flask : a flat glass bottle without a cup. She drank, and drew her handkerchief to wipe its mouth before returning it. He noticed the action :

"Don't do that ; it would be a pity."

She flushed deeper than the heat of the climb warranted :

"Shall we continue ?"

"Ten minutes' talk. I have some sandwiches to eat between sentences."

He drew forth a packet, and they ate daintily. He spoke :

"Sandwiches and wine of the country are ambrosia and nectar for gods."

"There the metaphor stops. I do not feel like a goddess, and even my imagination refuses to encompass you as a god."

"Why ? It's so easy. What so like Olympus as the Wetterhorn crowned with snow, with the sound of an occa-

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sional avalanche for Jovian thunder? The simile is perfect! This air raises my spirits: I can imagine anything! I never appreciated the *Iliad* so much as now. We'll take immortal names; I am Jupiter, and you, of course, are Juno."

"And the rustics in the village there are the mortals that strive below."

"That's it! You laugh! I don't mind."

"It reminds me of the time when, as a child, I used to play at 'make-believe.'"

"And no time since has been so happy."

"You are right. It's only when we begin to think for ourselves that unhappiness begins."

"Then for an hour we'll banish reasoning thought and make-believe. Come, my 'White-wristed one,' we'll leave our thrones and mount to 'Olympus' supreme height.'"

They mounted, the morning sun ardent upon them, their spirits exultant, with occasional laughter ringing peals. Such was the brightness and gaiety of his goddess that he was infected by it, and felt equal to playing Merry Andrew; while she, forgetting his position as transient god, regarded him as the good companion of her present pleasures. At the pause for breath he startled her with a question:

"Have you ever considered what constitutes happiness?"

She looked at him and observed his face covered by a mist of thought, as though his mind dwelt in mountain tops of reflection beyond the plane of his physical form. She was quick to notice this before she made answer:

"I only feel that the fulfilment of my own desires would constitute my own happiness."

"For instance?"

"For instance beautiful surroundings, a tasteful home, a husband whom I deeply loved, and who loved me equally, two or three children, and no cares on account of poverty, would constitute happiness for me. Luxury and gaiety would add and intensify. I think that luxury and pleasures—mental as well as physical—drive the greyness from life. I could not live an insipid life; I was not made for that."

"I look upon happiness more as the result of mental condition. If we would be happy we must find the means within ourselves—the proper understanding of right and wrong. Hope plays an important part, so long as we are not unfortunate enough to survive it. When that time comes we sit down and weep like Alexander when he had no more worlds to conquer."

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Her lips parted to a smile :

" You are a god and philosophise."

" I but keep up the character."

" All is good that the gods do. Right and wrong must ever go by personal standards ; to most people right too often means that which is usual, wrong that which is opposite."

" You speak truly, O goddess ; but as the time approaches when we must return to the mundane sphere, I beg you to tell me of your immortal wisdom what are your views on—love."

She was startled slightly, but her question came instantly to his request :

" Mortal or immortal ? "

" Since we shall soon be mortal again that is the view that would interest me most."

" Then I can only answer in the platitudes of the poets. Love is, rightly, a consuming fire ; it ennobles base men and women and lifts them to the level of the angels. Will that answer you ? "

" Not quite ; I'm leading to a point. If you loved a man, would you desire to know his past ? "

" Only as a matter of curiosity. I could forgive much. The position of men compared with that of women is so different that the relative past of the man and woman is judged from entirely different standpoints. I don't say that that is right. Women have their temptations as well as men. If there were fewer women in the world the chances are that fewer men and women would go wrong, and there would be fewer 'pasts' for consideration. Do you think my notions quixotic ? "

" I think they are common sense. Woman needs to go in armour in this censorious world."

" Yes. It was my fortune to be born a woman, and if I do not live like the average woman the world unsexes me, for petticoats and propriety are almost synonymous terms. Therefore I must never speak what I really think, for that would be immodest ; and my words must be antagonistic to my thoughts or I'm not virtuous. The modern woman is either a fool or a hypocrite."

" Occasionally she is a Joan of Arc armed *cap-à-pie* for her own principles."

" I desire that ! I'm a female Quixote eager to break a lance on behalf of my kind ; and in tilting at the windmills I shall no doubt receive many an overthrow."

He seized a point :

" Quixote had a Sancho Panza."

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She was oblivious to it :

"I expect to battle alone. If I married a husband who could afford to spare me from the home, I would speak from platforms on behalf of poor women who have gone under. I'd do the same even if I remained a spinster, and my income allowed."

Immediately he felt the lowliness of his position, and he commented in suddenly depressed tones :

"You must have a rich husband ?"

"Not necessarily. Love is first with me—strong and constant love. It is so with every girl. She will bear poverty with the man she adores. You must know that as well as I. My Sancho Panza must give me love as well as faithfulness—I should want love surpassing the love of women—more than man has yet given to woman."

"I feel like that."

"Then your wife must have been the happiest of women."

She saw his face darkened by the passing of a mental shadow.

"Forgive me ; I have touched on a painful subject."

"It is painful ; but I try to forget."

"Shall we go on ?"

"When you have answered me a question."

"Yes ?"

"Take me for your Sancho Panza ; you'll find me more faithful. I'll give you stronger love than woman's love."

It was unexpected, and her bosom was immediately a-heave. Her face flooded with instant colour, then ebbed white, and her nostrils palpitated with sudden agitation. In a minute the tide of blood returned in a whelming flood, and she sprang to her feet :

"I think we'll go on !"

She continued the climb at the pace of a mountain goat, and, not knowing how to interpret her action, he followed with a graver step. He feared that he had offended her, and he watched her quick-stepping before him with real anxiety. She pressed on, not turning her head, and he was framing an apology when he saw her reach the summit, fling herself on to the grass, and almost immediately rise again to stream her handkerchief to him.

He took it as a flag of truce, and hurried to rejoin her. He opened his mouth for the speech of regret, but her words came before his :

"There is a hotel here. Let us go in and have coffee."

XIX

THE climb of the Grosser Scheidegg is a bodily exhausting feat, creating volcanic thirst that calls for liquid pints to quench it. The walkers took seats on a rough bench before a long table outside the wooden barrack of a hotel, where a middle-aged Englishman and his two young daughters, tramping from Rosenlauri, were now sipping native wine. The new-comers gave the trio good-day, and fixed their eyes on the landscape while coffee and *Bairerisch-Bier* were brought.

Charity was curious to have information of the descent, and she questioned the two girls on the point. Her action tended to give Euean Strachan his mental ease, and he drew the Englishman into conversation. He received information in which he could only pretend interest, by reason of the more personal subject in his mind. To news that the stranger and his family were spending seven weeks among the mountains, that they came yearly, and that they walked much, he gave monosyllabic replies. The Englishman internally commented upon the unsociability of his own islanders, and turned the conversation from himself by questions. Were he and the lady walking to Rosenlauri? To Meiringen? Good! He envied them. They would find the tramp through the woods superb. It was best not to miss the Rosenlauri Glacier. They could afford to linger there if they were not pressed for time. The path was an infallible guide: they could not mistake the way. He signalled an adieu with a slight lifting of the hat to Charity, and the three set out for the descent to Grindelwald.

Charity allowed no pause, but gave comments on the information gained:

"I am glad there are woods. One of these girls spoke of a torrent as well. We walk beside it."

"You are not tired, I hope."

"I step on air. We won't hurry; a rest here will give a better appreciation for the walk down."

"As long as you like. We can walk in the evening; there is a moon. Delicious moments such as these are too infrequent to be thrown away. If life were all like this!"

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She smiled :

"It would be horribly monotonous—even as Jupiter and Juno."

"That is your view ; to me it would mean lifelong satisfaction."

"Believe me, you'd get dull."

His mood was the lover's ; and he was suddenly bold :

"Not with you, O goddess !"

Her face kindled :

"I think we had better be going."

After the climb and succeeding hour's rest, walking was pure enjoyment. They started the descent at a swing. Scouting trees soon warned them of their near approach to a wood. They saw it spread out in open order as if advancing, soldier-like, to assault the hill. Rearward was the main mass of foliage, to which the downward path wandered, broad as a mule track. Sunlight was blinding. Leftward were distant mountains with trees rising to such a height that they seemed to comb the clouds ; on the right, closer at hand, were mountain walls of precipice, and mountain summits pushing into the sky. To the imaginative they suggested majesty sitting in eternal patience.

The sound of a cow-horn, blown by a peasant in the valley, was sweet as notes from St Cecilia's organ stealing among the mountains. The cowherd, lying on the grass, had seen their approach, and sprung to his instrument to charm centimes to his cap. He stood as they came, a tramp of a man, bareheaded and barefooted, and, receiving coins from both, played them with the weird *ranz-des-vaches* down the valley to the outskirts of the wood. Music of rushing water succeeded the last dying echo of the horn, and they surmised the proximity of foaming torrents. There was a suggestion of ecstasy in Charity's voice :

"Water ! Foaming water ! The very sound of it cools me ! I'd love to bathe."

Never having bathed in a river she pictured the joy of a long swim in refreshing brine.

"The shade of the wood will cool you. We'll pause there."

He looked at her so hard that she lowered her head, blushing. Plainer than the song of the river he heard the Syren song that his own heart sang. To her his glance conveyed its full meaning and her heart began to skip, as it made her aware of what was to come from the lips of the man who walked by her side ; and, as she felt herself strangely dreading

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that moment, her woman's nature told her that she must do all in her power to avert its coming. Her talk was therefore gay to frivolity. To him it had no meaning, his mind was deep in reflection, and his words at length brought them face to face.

"I am suffering mental pain, Charity—I call you by your Christian name—I am suffering mental pain when I should be nothing if not happy. I thought that during the last two weeks I had learnt to know you. At first I took you for a flirt—but I find that you don't flirt—wilfully. Three days ago I determined to offer you my love, but since then I have learnt from your own lips that you have aspirations which I am not rich enough to help you to reach. Those three days have been days of torture: to-day is the worst of them, for I have come to the moment when I am to ask if my love will be accepted by you. If you refuse me I go on to-morrow alone—I leave Switzerland to be away from you."

He saw her face, flushing duskily, droop to her bosom. He pressed her with words, deliberately uttered:

"I have a literary work in hand. It will take the public—I think so, though no one thinks so well of his work as the worker himself. It will be a great success, or a great failure. I put my soul into it, and if it is the success I imagine I shall be well off. It may not seem right to a girl with ambition, but I ask you to run the risk with me. I love you, Charity."

The strings of her heart vibrated to the music of his voice; she was all a-quiver, aching to be possessed. But, diplomatically, her reply was not calculated to give him immediate satisfaction:

"It is difficult to answer you."

"No; let your heart say. I have tried to speak before—to-day. I believe you knew what was coming, and you fled from it as from danger."

She gave him a smile like a gleam of pale sunshine. Her former love was in her mind as she spoke:

"There are some dangers it is best not to face, but to turn one's back upon."

"You play with me! I was wrong when I said that you were no intentional flirt."

"No, Euean, I am no flirt. You were right. I respect men's hearts."

"You spoke my Christian name!"

A momentary bashfulness enchained her reply. Then she freed it:

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"I called you Euean."

"Charity!"

He drank in the name from her lips; it rushed to his heart and glowed in his veins:

"My love! My dearest!"

He took her face between the palms of his two hands, and drew her refreshing mouth to his:

"My own!—my sweetheart!"

"Euean—my love!"

The hidden stream plashed love music. From the valley came the far-off echo of the cow-horn. He drew back to gaze at her and saw her face lit by the auroral light of love. It was slightly crimson; her lips were slightly parted. He asked her how great was her love, and her kisses told him all that her tongue had no eloquence to tell.

Thus she found herself beloved and in love. In love! Ah, me, this was love indeed! The other? That could not have been love. Infatuation, perhaps—a too great eagerness to conquer a man; what you will, but not love. This only could be that! O miracle! O prodigy most wonderful! What harmony had burst upon her!

Beautiful, blessed Switzerland; land of paradise, land for love! She had struck the keynotes, and was intoxicated with the music. O two-weeks' miracle that had changed her wintry days to the burgeoning spring of joy!

They lingered in the wood as if time were no more. Surrounding trifles, interspersed with ejaculations on their happiness, were topics for conversation. They came to talk of trees:

"I have had feelings for them in England, Euean. I am still subject to pangs of pity, and I pity trees when I see them shivering naked in winter blasts. They seem almost human, with their bare arms stretched to the cold sky, as if they were so many beggars in the wind imploring protection."

"I thought you disliked English scenery?"

"The monotony of it: it has no sympathy. I think my dislike must have been due to the desire for sympathy. If I had had someone to love—other than those of my own family—I think it might have been different. The contentment that love brings throws a warmer light on all the world. For trees I have always had some sort of love; I shall have more for we have pledged ourselves beneath them."

"You are a strange child."

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"I am silly, I know, but I can't help it. Though English scenery has never inspired me, the winter misery of it has generally affected me. I always seem to feel pity for any of God's inanimate creations under melancholy circumstances. I think the fields are shivering when thick mists roll over them; and the smell of decaying leaves in autumn depresses me. I think of death."

"Then if you feel thus for inanimate nature, what are your feelings for things that have sensations?"

"They are as keen, but no worse. The cry of lambs on a dull spring day makes me miserable; I think they are shivering—just like the fields in mist. Nature's justice is unequal. There is no harmony in the law that gives mercy to one set of creatures, and not to another. The condemned ox smells the blood in the slaughter-house, and we think it no cruelty because its death is to serve our human purposes. Nature's logic is horrible; it is the logic of the powerful autocrat, and the laws of the autocrat are selfish and unjust—almost always untempered with mercy."

"I agree that cruelty is but a barbarous way of asserting power. In this man is almost as autocratic as Nature. The rules that govern the conduct of society, selfishness, even love itself is cruel."

"Love most of all. What can be more cruel than the love which thousands of poor girls have ready for husbands that are not to exist for them. That is cruellest."

"That is Nature's cruelty in the matter of supply."

"It is man's bad government! I believe that a man is supplied for every woman. Wars and bad laws reduce the number of men before their time for marriage, and, in consequence, thousands of women live the lives of either martyrs or profligates. Would you send your armies of men to lose their lives in conquering nations? or would you have them multiply and strengthen nations by marriage? To me there is something better than dying for one's country, and that is living for it."

Her freedom of speech amazed him. He recognised that her views of life had length and breadth, as well as depth; and he recognised also that unless the length and breadth of life were understood, as well as the depth, it was impossible to obtain a full view of it.

The view of Rosenlauri Glacier gave another charm to this walk through Eden. They were as the first man and woman, wondering at all they saw. They lingered on a

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rough seat, until the light began to thicken at the foot of the mountains, and evening signalled to day the time of day's departure.

Chill breaths from the mountains suggested the movement forward. Evening was windy, whispering. Night came slowly gliding out of the valley and cautiously placed black feet on the heights. A white moon lighted her, while the wide dome of the sky was filled with long trailing wisps of vapour that had stolen from secret hiding-places, until presently the moon walked in halls of white marble clouds.

At the restarting Euean observed that his companion limped badly. He was anxious for the reason.

"I am afraid there is a blister on my heel. I felt it when we came down the Scheidegg. There can be only a few more miles. I'll make it an excuse for the support of your arm."

"You must take your boot off, dearest. What, shoes! She who climbs mountains in shoes pays a penalty. I'll take it off for you."

"I cannot walk in my stocking."

"Your must wear one of my boots."

"But you?"

"I'll bind my puttee round my foot; there are yards of it."

The attempt to wear his boot was a painful experiment. She took it off:

"Your arm will help me."

"It shall. My brave girl! You have felt this for hours and not complained?"

"I have not felt it lately. The magic of love!"

"I'll carry you."

"Never!"

"You are a mere baby to lift."

"I prefer your arm. I promise to lean heavily."

He gave it with soothing words meant to encourage. In the half-darkness progress was slow. The rough track of the final hill made painful walking for Charity. She leaned heavily, and requested frequent halts for rest.

Clustered twinkling lights in the new valley gave them the hope of Meiringen. It suggested the termination of the walk, and Charity thought of Mrs Quarmby-Smith:

"She will be anxious. I should not be surprised to meet a search party."

"Your blistered foot must be the excuse for our delay. To-night you must be too tired to give other explanations."

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"I feel tired now that the end is in sight. My weight must have helped to tire you."

He declared, illogically, that it had buoyed him. In truth he did not know how tired he was until he was seated in the Alpen Hotel. Mrs Quarmby-Smith met them; she was effervescing with matter for conversation:

"How you have alarmed me! I thought you had fallen over a precipice, and I've been sweatin' hot and cold to think of you lyin' at the bottom with eagles hoverin' over you. There *are* eagles in these mountains—I asked the manager. He's been most kind. Dinner is over ages ago—an excellent dinner, quite recherchy. You'll have to have some cold stuff. I told the landlord that would suit. I had a most interestin' journey here. There was an old gentleman in the train who persisted in talkin' French—I believe he really *was* French. I don't know how I should have got on if I hadn't been to boardin' school. He got me petty pangs and burr—that's rolls and butter, you know—and such delightful coffee! A most charmin' man! He'd travelled all over the world; and when the train left me at the station he helped me with my 'oldall, and raised his hat just like a gentleman—— Oh, Mr Strachan, I'm sorry to say that you'll have to sleep out. Has the landlord told you? The hotel's full, and some of the gentlemen have had to get beds outside. I took the last bedroom for Charity and me. There are two beds—English, thank goodness! not those high ottoman things we've had at some hotels, which you have to climb into. Tell me about your walk, and why you are so late."

They ate a cold meal, Mrs Quarmby-Smith sitting at the table to hear the account of their experiences. She informed them that most of the guests had gone by the mountain railway, outside the hotel, to see the illumination of the Reichenbach Falls, and that only her anxiety had kept her from accompanying them. She was tired, and would now go to bed, and she thought that Charity would also do well to retire at once.

"I'll come presently, Mrs Quarmby-Smith. I should have nightmare, and dream that the Wetterhorn was smothering me if I went so soon after this hearty supper. I'll explore the garden of the hotel with Mr Strachan, if he is not too tired. I promise not to be long."

They bade Mrs Quarmby-Smith good-night, and wandered out of doors. Charity declared that the hotel, outlined

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with hundreds of electric lamps, reminded her of the description of Aladdin's Palace. A small knot of visitors, that had declined the temptation of the illuminated falls, were chatting and drinking coffee in the verandah. The pair lingered there to drink liqueurs; then taking her lover's arm Charity strolled with him into the grounds.

They thought that they had much of importance to talk about; and he asked her to keep their engagement secret until their return to England. Under the trees his arm belted her waist, and he led her to a little terrace, with a stone balustrade for fence, on which they sat to look at the night. She offered him her hand:

"Take my hand, Euean. How beautiful the night is! Let us look at it and be happy. You are happy, my love?"

She had noticed that a moodiness seemed to have settled on him like a cloud from the mountain. He came from it with a smile:

"I am very happy."

"You seemed very quiet. I shall call you the 'Knight of the Rueful Countenance.'"

"I was thinking of the change in my life."

"You shall always be happy."

"We will both be happy."

They leaned to each other and watched the moon during a long silence. Night was mild and the wind had sunk to the caves of the mountains. The girl broke silence:

"I am yours, Euean?"

"Yes, dearest; I am proud of you."

"Now I'm sure that you love me. When will you marry me, Euean?"

The amazing question came quietly from her lips, in her usual even tones. He showed astonishment by an involuntary loosening of the pressure of his fingers on her hand:

"Some day, Charity—soon."

"As soon as we return to England?"

"Dear love, I would marry you to-morrow if it were possible. The waiting will be short, I hope. There are arrangements to be made. I must find a place near London where we may live—I must be near London on account of my work. We shall not have to wait long and the time will be happy. I shall see you often."

"I shall write you long letters when we are separated."

"Yes; every day. We must have love letters."

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The world, under night's velvet covering, was becoming drowsy for sleep. They drew towards the hotel, pacing slowly, for the farewell till the morrow. They paused at the steps :

" Good-night, sweetheart."

" Good-night, dearest."

They lingered a moment in sweet parting.

" You will see me to-morrow ? "

" Of course, silly boy ! "

" How soon ? Early ? "

" Yes, early. Good-night."

" You won't be too tired ? "

" No."

" Then good-night. A last kiss."

He watched her move towards the hotel, and called her before she had gone ten yards :

" Charity ! "

" Yes, dearest."

" Don't forget, dear—early."

" Silly fellow ! "

" Let me walk to the door with you. I have something to say."

" Come then."

They paced together, arms intertwined :

" What did you want to say, Euean, dear ? "

" Only that I love you."

She laughed :

" You're a dear fraud ! "

" If only we could walk together, like this, for ever."

" Yes ; but I must go in now. Mrs Quarmby-Smith may be awake, and we are the only people who remain outside."

" I'm selfish ; and you must be very tired, dear girl—and your bad foot ! One kiss."

He gave a dozen, and then she mounted the steps reluctantly. He sent her a low-voiced call :

" Dearest ! "

" Yes, dearest ? "

" You have not said good-night."

" Good-night, love."

" Wait a moment."

He ran lightly tiptoe, up the steps, and kissed her again :

" Good-night, my own—my dear, dear love ! "

" Good-night, dear. To-morrow ! "

" And we are god and goddess still ? "

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"No—just mortals!"

She entered and closed the door. He watched until he saw the light in her room. Presently there was a movement at the blind.

He threw a kiss, then waited twenty minutes. The blind moved again; he threw more kisses. He gazed at the blank window, waited five minutes, shivered and turned towards his lodging.

Thus was opened the old Game of Two.

XX

ÆOLIAN harps, fingered by the wind of the soft touch, gave no sweeter music than Love played to the young man who, of his frailty, blackened paper to gain the public blessing. His excelsior banner, newly brodered by his nonpareil maiden with the word to spur him, felt at the leaning, a stronger staff than the sturdy ambition that had so far sustained him. Ambition and love were now intertwined: a sapling rod for good support.

He had been accustomed to a vagabond path in life, feeling its thorn-pricks till he came to despair of flower-strewn ways. Circumstance, flogging him on, had thrashed from him the belief in all things but himself. He had had troubles, but his desire to write his name on the world had kept his bitter heart brave. Now from darkness he had emerged into instantaneous sunshine of love; he had almost renounced the hopes of a fair existence when the sudden recrudescence of glare from his heart's sun discovered the flowery path, fair and plain in its bright light.

So life lay all harmonious under the bird-song of his singing heart. Life was holy living, without a casting shadow! But, no! He knew that memory stored a tone of sadness: the recollection of some event of the past, maybe, that was the black band disfiguring his shining path.

The early morning sun came to Charity's open window, and love beckoned her to green fields for the early appointment with her lover and a ramble in warm rays.

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She went with light steps, tripping happily, a song upon her lips. It was a day for lovers. There was romance in the music of falling water ; there was love in Charity's heart, and she sang. Singing, singing she roved through lush meadows, and, tired at last, sat on a bank to rest.

Her lover came, like Adonais, through the brake. She was not surprised that he had found her. His presence seemed the final requisite touch to the perfection of the day. He sat beside her and took her hand.

She gave him a glad smile. He smiled in return, and pressed her fingers. Together they gazed at the mountains, at the golden rapture of the fields, and up at the blue of the sky.

The faint warm scent of vegetation filled the air, intoxicating them with delight. The sun smiled on them from his amber throne, and bade them love each other. They kissed.

Green grass and moss were woven in a carpet at their feet, with here and there a flower for pattern. Love murmured in the air, in the green trees, in the flowers, in the sunlight ; and they kissed again.

The golden sunshine bade them love and kiss once more. The fresh green of the earth bade them give thanks for the day, and they gave thanks in another kiss. The day was given by God, their love was given by God, and the day and the love yielded their own reward.

As they sat he looked at her to become suddenly aware of the depth and breadth of his happiness. It broke at his heart with a thrill. His love would not allow a less forceful gaze ; and as she observed the ardour of it, a soft, subdued look came into her own eyes. It was as if they plighted themselves again. Without speech it told her that he was hers, and no present word was necessary. He saw the beauty of love's meaning in her face, and his head swam with happiness. He saw her eyes like brown pansies ; her mouth, like rose-leaves, pink and folded ; her all-sunshine face, in which animation lay awake, and he felt that he had need of her for ever. Her woman's influence was upon him, and he was sure that no man would hesitate to overcome obstacles that might bar the path of the way to the achievement of such a woman.

Within her love panted. Her heart was full. She grasped the proffered cup of life with both hands, and, tremblingly, drank.

" I have never been so happy, Euean."

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Her red, half-open lips challenged a kiss, and he gave it.

"I'll love you for ever, Charity; 'for ever and a day.'"

"'For ever and a day.' " She repeated the words dreamily.
"'For ever and a day'; it is a phrase that gives an added bliss to eternity."

In her face was the satisfied expression of the realisation of her long-cherished desire, and her features seemed to have softened and grown more gentle.

"You are very beautiful, Charity."

She flashed white teeth on him in return for the compliment, and made him repeat it.

"Dear girl! You are beautiful!—so beautiful!"

No one but he could have said the words so tenderly; no eyes but his could have looked so worshipfully at her.

"I have prayed for love like this, Euean."

"For my love?"

"For a lover—to be loved to madness. I have wanted passionate love."

"I love you to distraction—I love you madly!"

"I know you do, dearest; kiss me."

"I believe that you were born for me."

"I think that we were born for each other."

"Why could we not have met before, Charity?"

She saw his eyes through a drawn veil of reverie which momentarily covered them.

"It makes very little difference so long as we have met, dear Euean."

"My life would have been happier."

"You have had troubles? Tell me of your wife."

She thought that he winced.

"It is painful. I do not like to speak of those days."

"Never mind, dearest. We will not talk of them now. Some day when we are married, and you have learned how great my love is, and all that I can be to you, you shall tell me."

He had drawn his hand away, but hers still retained the feeling of his fingers' pressure: the touch of the loved lingered with the beloved.

She spoke again:

"We all have our troubles, Euean. I have had mine, but they have not been caused by the loss of any who are dear to me. Mine have been due to the dread that I should live and die an old maid. I don't think I could have lived to slaughter reputations for the amusement of afternoon tea-tables."

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She smiled.

"There are many old maids who are good and honourable women."

"But they are no less pitiable. In reality I object to the term 'old maid': it has almost become a term of reproach. But the fact remains that many unmarried women have the old-maidish character—the love of gossip, the skill of building mountains out of ant-heaps, and a hundred similar characteristics. These things are generally caused by the absence of marriage ties to give them more material occupation; and the dread of falling into this condition has weighed upon me for years."

"I think you need never have had any real fear. Nature has given you recommendations."

"You are complimentary, and I am weak enough to allow compliments to please me; but when men have so wide a field in which to choose their wives they do not always confine themselves to choosing among the women who have only natural attractions to recommend them. I am one of a large family; we are poor, and the man who will choose his wife from a large family brought up in poverty is capable of self-sacrifice."

He laughed shortly:

"Do you compliment me? or do you seek to make me dissatisfied with my bargain?"

"I have every confidence in you, because I know that you love me. That is why I can speak freely with you."

"And I, also, am poor."

"No; we are both rich; I in your love, you in mine. I think that love is much more to me than it is to you, as marriage is more to woman than it is to man. To her it is the one object of life; to the man it is only one of the objects of life. You have your career as well; the married life is my only career. When marriage means so much to a woman she is justified in practising all her arts to secure the object of her life."

"You have drunk of strange ideas, sweetheart."

"I don't think that you really believe that, dearest. You have not thought of this subject as I have, and now that I point it out to you it seems strange. But is it not true?"

"I cannot help thinking that it must be. Poor women! How are they to be made happy?"

"There is much to be done—much can be done. The case of the unmarried woman is by no means hopeless. Emigra-

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tion will do much, if women will only take their courage in their hands. England has a big and fair empire beyond seas, with Englishmen calling for wives, and land waiting to be peopled. Laws can also do much: the Government should help the unmarried woman in as unobtrusive a way as possible, for the unmarried woman has feelings."

The men—we women look to the men—who will battle with prejudice and the puritan spirit, will win blessings. I long to be a man when I think of it! I wish you were a politician or social reformer, Euean, dear!"

"I am of peaceful habits; I have my books."

"Books are good, they have taught me much; but I think that the man in the public fight is to be envied. I once knew a young politician of whom I hoped much."

"Is he dead—you say that you knew him 'once.'"

"He was my lover. I thought that I loved him, but I was mistaken. It must have been admiration for him, and the calling he had chosen. He may yet do great things."

"I am curious."

She told him of George Graham, and he was seized with a ridiculous jealousy that he was not the first lover that had come to her. Watching him she saw the yellow look in his eyes, and it pleased her:

"Foolish boy! I like to see you jealous—it is another proof of love. There is no real cause for jealousy, however. I know now that I did not love him, because my love for you is so different. God sometimes gives us feelings that we cannot understand. I am sure that George did not love me, because he gave me up."

"No; he could not have loved you; no man could give you up who was really in love."

"He has a proud father who expects him to marry a woman of high social position. He threatened to ruin his son's prospects if he did not obey him. Looking at the matter calmly I cannot altogether blame George, although to be rejected is a bitter thing for a woman. I believed that it was more bitter for me than for most. I know now that it was the best thing that could have happened. Are you satisfied, dear?"

"Yes,—I think so."

"It looks as if I were anxious to secure a husband, doesn't it? That is so, and I am not ashamed to say it. You have to fight for most things in this world. It is pitiful that young girls must fight, or go under. I almost think that our sex is accursed."

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"That is going too far. The present evil is due to the disagreement of civilisation and Nature. The influence of sex, which dominates men's and women's actions, is abased in the social scheme because society makes the great mistake of opposing Nature. When society opens its eyes there will be a great emancipation from social and moral slaveries."

"Yes, dear Euean. I long for that time. I would make the superfluous woman no longer superfluous. I wish to see her emancipated from narrow convention; and I believe that my dream will become a reality."

Even philosophic lovers must obey nature's call of hunger; and sentiment and theories had not defected the keen edge-work of the mountain-air. They went to the hotel for breakfast.

Meiringen had its charms for Mrs Quarmby-Smith, who proposed a two days' rest. She expected Mr Strachan to make the offer of his adieux; instead he made it clear that the society of Mrs Quarmby-Smith had an interest sufficient to retain him in her company, if she thought him no bore. She was flattered, and suggested the return home together. Charity was absent, but instantly he agreed, and conveyed the news to her:

"Mrs Quarmby-Smith is splendid! She has asked me to return to England with you; and hopes, some day, that I will call at her house. She promises currant tea-cakes in honour of the visit."

"And there'll be cold tongue and ham and fowls, Euean; such a feast! These Yorkshire people feed like the Homeric heroes—as heartily and as often. You must know that Yorkshire is as famous for its pigs as for its puddings; and that appetite and hospitality are the names of Yorkshire twins."

He laughed at her humour:

"I thought that I disliked Mrs Quarmby-Smith, she is so—well, vulgar. I find that she has a good heart."

"Rich people are not vulgar—only unconventional. You accepted the invitation, of course?"

"Of course. I shall want to see you."

"Do you know, Euean, Mrs Quarmby-Smith has the reputation of being a matchmaker. I really should not be surprised, now that she has given a proof of her liking for you by inviting you to her house, if she did not endeavour to make a match between us. If you don't dislike match-making I think that we might fall into any plans of the kind she may hatch for our benefit. It would be splendid fun!"

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"I've nothing to say against the matchmaker who exhibits some discretion; she is almost indispensable nowadays. But I thought we would keep our engagement secret until we were back in England."

"I don't think it is necessary, unless you have any special purpose to serve."

"No?—but——"

"Well, let us pretend to fall in with her matchmaking plans—if she has any—quite innocently. I should love to please the dear creature, she has been so good; and I'm sure she'll crow to my sister Faith if she thinks that she has brought about our engagement."

"If it will please you and her I will agree with due meekness, although I shall make a poor lover before a third party."

Lucerne was stifling in the heat of the September sun. Mrs Quarmby-Smith complained, and mentioned home, a word that was not unwelcome to Euean Strachan, with whom holiday funds ran low. To the lovers the two days' sojourn was a return to the chapter of their love and their hopes. They had long conversations in the romantic atmosphere of the mediæval quarter, under the canopy of the old Kapellbrücke that spans the rapid Reuss, and in the shadow of the Hofkirche's cool cloisters.

It almost seemed that Mrs Quarmby-Smith was to belie her reputation as a matchmaker, when one evening, in that lady's presence, Charity unwittingly addressed her lover as "Dearest." Mrs Quarmby-Smith's ear promptly caught the endearment, and Charity's confusion confirmed the surprise that had crept to her protector's face. Mrs Quarmby-Smith was the first to speak:

"I do believe you two have been up to something!"

She looked at Charity, who promptly turned her head; then she turned her gaze on Euean who attempted a rescue:

"Up to something, Mrs Quarmby-Smith?"

"I believe you've gone and got engaged."

"Well——"

"I am sure you have! Under my very eyes, too! And without tellin' me! That's too bad!"

"It's only just happened, Mrs Quarmby-Smith, I assure you; and we intended to tell you when we returned to England. I hope that you don't think we had any particular reason for keeping you in the dark."

"All I can say is, that it's too bad to keep me out of it!"

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When did it happen? Tell me. Oh, I know! It was the day you walked to Meiringen. Of course it was. Isn't that so? That's why you were late for dinner! Of course I see it all! You've got to thank me for it after all, young man; I allowed Charity to walk with you! This is the second engagement I've brought about this year. Don't you thank me for keeping myself out of the way, Mr Strachan?"

"Indeed I do—I'm most grateful."

"And, Charity, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I feel that I must join Euean in thanking you. You are quite right in thinking that we became engaged on the day we walked to Meiringen."

"I knew it! And now, I suppose, you'll expect me to take all the blame from your sister. That is a point I shall have to consider as you have kept me in the dark so long. Still, as the engagement is due to me I do not think I shall shirk the responsibility."

Mrs Quarmby-Smith was delighted. She satisfied herself that she had made a match for Charity with a very worthy young fellow, who, if he was poor, was clever, and would be sure to rise. She were already planning the words in which she would announce the engagement to Charity's sister, and it formed a considerable part of her thoughts on the journey home.

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TO Charity the passing of a single month away from her lover was a perpetual hunger and thirst for his presence. There were occasions even when she felt desperate with loneliness. She wrote to him daily, and in her letters she often spoke of her desire for him. At times, more longing and more ardent, she wrote twice a day ; and she even began to keep a diary which she forwarded to him weekly that he might read the record of her habits. Even the chronicled trivialities of her life interested him, and often, coming across his own name when reading her effusions in his lonely London lodging, he fell to musing on how greatly she loved him. Then the desire to see her made him restless, and for hours he found himself unable to work. The holiday he had taken in Switzerland had made such a deep inroad in his small store of money that it was a sickening thing to contemplate ; but he determined on collar work and he sought a regular appointment on a newspaper staff in the hope of being able to write to Charity to fix the day of their marriage. He failed in the attainment of permanent employment and had to look to hack-work for his daily bread, with dreams of the accomplishment of his book and the letters of Charity for consolation.

During the trip to Switzerland Charity had so endeared herself to Mrs Quarmby-Smith, who was captivated by the naturalness and vivacity of the girl's manner, that to retain her companionship she offered her a home until the time of her marriage, with the salary of a lady companion as additional inducement and little to do beyond giving her companionship to earn it. Sure that her sister would frequently visit her, Faith had no real objection to make on account of the setting aside of her own offer of a home. Charity accepted therefore the terms of her friend with gratitude, influenced by the thought that when Euean came north he would, under the shelter of Mrs Quarmby-Smith's roof, be spared the witnessing of her brother-in-law's debaucheries.

Mrs Quarmby-Smith's invitation came to him at a time when he was particularly busy with journalistic work. Apollo-

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getically he made an indefinite postponement; but when she received no further sign of his coming, Mrs Quarmby-Smith wrote again, saying that she had secured the presence of a nephew and niece in the house to help to preserve the proprieties, but that the nephew, being young and flameful, might not be proof against Charity's charms if the visit were longer delayed. He must come at once, or his late arrival might be consoled only by the departing bloom of a middle-aged widow, long shelved by discerning men.

The hopelessness of his lot in being unable to earn, during the time of the suggested holiday, the money that the early prospect of housekeeping made necessary, rendered Euean Strachan proof against the temptation to accept definitely the invitation until he had the satisfaction of a balance to his account. Charity's backing of the proposal was resisted with equal firmness; but he might not have found this possible had she not hinted of an impending visit of Mrs Quarmby-Smith and herself, early in the new year, well before the beginning of the season. It was the widow's custom to be in London in March or April to face the ordeal of modistes' fittings, many purchasings, and the renovation of her town flat in view of the greater ordeal of the season's demands on her as a woman—an imagined woman of fashion.

Charity drew consolation from a common-sense view of her lover's presentment of the matter, in the preparation of small household draperies and linen furnishings for her anticipated home, in her letters to Euean, in his to her, and the hourly shortening of the time to the day of their meeting. He wrote that he was advertising in Kent and Sussex newspapers for a cottage within an hour's railway run of London—country for cheapness. He suggested a quiet wedding, with the presence of only a few intimate friends, to save expense. At news of this the spontaneous generosity of Mrs Quarmby-Smith and the potentialities it had for herself, splendidly gowned, of royally shining, prompted her to offer to bear the cost of a more ambitious ceremony. Charity's thanks were almost boundless; and she determined to reserve the pleasure of informing her lover until the time when they should meet, in order that she might not be denied the satisfaction of witnessing his gratification.

Thus passed succeeding months until the end of March brought Euean the news of the date of their arrival. In four days they followed, and on the evening of their coming

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he left his lodging for Mrs Quarmby-Smith's flat in Ashley Gardens.

Charity expected to see him all joy, but almost immediately she observed that he bore the appearance of one ill, worried and depressed. His state forced her to alarm when, during dinner, she noticed that he seemed to take little interest in either general or personal topics of conversation, that he trifled with his food and that he gave her frequent glances which she found herself unable to interpret with any satisfaction, but which she thought were uneasy and foreboding. This air was detected by Mrs Quarmby-Smith, who immediately gave her opinion that he had been working too hard. Charity seemed to find relief in agreement:

"I'm sure he has! It's too bad of you, dear!"

His laugh was palpably unnatural:

"I must say that I have had a great deal to do. I think that I have been working too late, perhaps. A rest, and I shall be myself again."

"Well, you sha'n't stay late to-night, Mr Strachan. I'm tired and shall go to bed early. You must not keep Charity up later than ten. You'll want to do a bit of courtin', I suppose. You must leave the drawin'-room to me, but you can sit in the library. There is a fire. Come to lunch to-morrow—no, dinner: we may be shoppin' late; and I'm sure you'd like to have to-morrow evenin' with Charity."

He thanked her, and afterwards she bade him good-night and retired to the drawing-room. Charity led the way to the library, and they seated themselves on a couch before the fire, which she asked him to stir. The flames sprang up to illuminate their faces, and he saw hers enraptured in the thought of having him to herself again.

"Shall I switch on the electric-light, Euean, dear, or do you prefer the light from the fire?"

"I like the firelight best, dearest. Is this evening to be a foretaste of cosy winter evenings together in our little home?"

"Of course, goose!"

"Well, sit quite close to me. I can talk better so."

"I have much to say, but first you must talk about yourself. I don't like to come to London to find you looking ill; it's disappointing. I could almost cry!"

"I shall be myself again in a few days. Now let us talk about something else."

He repeated the plans he had given her by letter, and

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in exchange she gave an account of her life in Yorkshire. The subject of neither was news to the other, but it revealed a freshness in the verbal repetition. Then she made him acquainted with Mrs Quarmby-Smith's offer to pay the expenses of their wedding. At the end of the recital she was surprised to find that he remained silent.

"Haven't you anything to say, Euean?"

The tone told him of her disappointment.

"Yes, dear, of course. I think that it is very kind of Mrs Quarmby-Smith. I knew of her generosity, but I could not expect this."

"I thought that you would be very pleased. You look miserable for a bridegroom, Euean."

Sighing, he looked at her with unmistakable sadness:

"I know that it must seem unkind of me to be in this humour when our wedding-day is so near."

"You appear to have something on your mind, dearest. You are depressed."

"I have a confession to make."

Her feeling of curiosity was tinged with alarm, but she spoke cheerfully:

"A woman is always ready to hear a confession. My ears are twitching. Is it very dreadful?"

"It concerns my past. I have been very worried."

"Well, make haste and earn my forgiveness. You have been like other men?—you have lived a man's life?"

"But suppose there is something connected with me which, if you heard it, would make it impossible for you to marry me?"

She had a presentiment of something terrible: her heart quickened:

"Euean, have you anything very dreadful to say? You seem so strange!"

"I have but an old story to tell you, Charity; a story that is only new in its variations. Give me your hand; I can talk with more confidence when I hold it."

She surrendered her hand, and he felt it tremble slightly. He sought to reinforce his small courage:

"You do love me, dearest?"

"Yes."

"Very much?"

"Yes, very much; but you almost frighten me, Euean. What are you going to tell me?"

"I have been too much of a coward to write and tell you,

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dearest. I have put it off for fear of losing your love ; but when I remembered that you were more broad-minded than most girls I swore that I would get it over as soon as I saw you. Since you have been away from me in Yorkshire something has happened that makes it impossible to keep you longer in the dark."

Her heart rapped postman at her ribs, but she straightened herself and set her lips. It was her usual way of meeting blows.

"Euean, you make me tremble!"

He still found it hard to discover the courage he desired :

"Bear up, my sweetheart."

"Tell me quickly, Euean ; I must know at once!"

"My wife—!"

"Yes!—she—?"

"She is not dead, dearest."

"Oh, my God!"

She snatched her hand from his, started up and covered her face. In this moment of his distress the courage he had waited for suddenly came at the sight of her misery, and he talked rapidly, endeavouring to unlock her hands from her face.

"Oh, my darling, what a blow this must be for you! Take your hands away and let me look at you."

He pulled them away and caught a glimpse of her features. They were withered. She moaned :

"Oh, my God! my God!"

"Don't, sweetheart darling; don't—it hurts."

She shrieked :

"Hurts!—it hurts! It hurts you, does it? It *kills* me! I'm going mad! You vile scoundrel! You have been making love to me, you—you brute, while you led me to believe that your wife was dead! What did you take me for, I wonder? A common drab? Yes, that was it! A common drab for a starveling writer! Go into the streets, and go—yes, go to the devil!"

He was writhing under her frenzied lashing, and she saw his agony without comprehending the pain she was giving him. He stood up and paced, his hands clenched in his hair. She watched him, and laughed—a sound that seemed to come from hell. It commanded him to halt before her, and he slid on to his knees and gripped her arms with fingers terribly strong:

"Don't!—don't, Charity! My wife—my love! Hear me—you must! You'll forgive me when you know all."

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"I never will! Don't touch me. You hurt, you brute!"

"I'll take all the names you like to call me, but you shall hear what I have to say. It is my right."

She was compelled to look at his face, and she saw that it was sickly white, and graced in hard lines like rock. A great dry sob escaped her, and, fearing to break down, she spoke pathetically:

"And I was going to make you so happy."

There was a breaking in his own voice:

"I know it, my darling. You must let me speak. I loved you—I love you still, as much as you love me; and I believed my wife dead."

His words were a softening, and thinking of the happiness she had hoped for she saw herself as an object for great pity, and burst into sudden tears. Immediately his arms were round her neck, his kisses on her face; and he endeavoured to comfort her with endearing words that bore evidence of his own strong agitation. She struggled feebly to free herself of his embrace, but he clung to her with masterful grasp until her sobs began to die. Then he spoke gently:

"Charity, dearest, I am going to show you that I have not wronged you with intention. Hear me to the end without speaking, if you can. Then I will accept your judgment of my conduct."

She was not listening, and his words seemed to come from a mighty distance. At this moment she had only understanding left to know that he was not for her—that she had lost him. He looked at her. She seemed to be under a cloud of stupor that gave her no appearance of sympathetic attention. He felt that it would be hard to talk to her thus, but he took a deep breath as if suspiring courage, and began his story in low even tones:

"I was married young, Charity, to a fascinating and rather frivolous girl. Like myself she was an orphan, living with a rich old aunt who was a bedridden invalid. My wife was one of those creatures who capture the attention of men immediately on acquaintance; and I was green—inexperienced of women. She displayed her charms and accomplishments, and I found her dazzling. Other men admired her, and that only stimulated me to win her for myself. I believed that she loved me and her aunt gave me preference over other suitors. Our courtship was not long—a few months. She had a little money of her own, and I had a good salary as a sub-editor of a country newspaper; so that we started life together

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happily enough. I think that I was devoted to her. I must say, as a point against myself, that I was not, perhaps, an altogether ideal husband. The literary habit tends to make one self-absorbed, and I daresay that, on that account, I neglected her—at anyrate I was not always prepared to give her that frequent attention and society that young wives have a right to expect from their husbands; and my experience proves that women never forgive neglect. Another thing that led to incompatibility in our lives lay in the fact that our tastes were totally alienated. I am inclined to be studious; I love books and the peaceful pleasures of mental amusements; she was all for frivolous enjoyments: she loved admiration, show and expensive pleasures. When I tell you that I am of a hot and impetuous nature you will understand how difficult I found it to curb my temper when, on more than one occasion, I found her openly flirting with married men. Remonstrances and upbraidings were the cause of frequent quarrels, and our lives, during the two years we lived together, were those of devils."

As he proceeded a look of terrible desolation crept into Charity's face. She might have been Misery carved in stone for all the sign she gave of human animation. He stood up from his seat to continue the story, measuring his perturbation with wide strides:

"The evil developed rapidly until one day I had unmistakable evidence that she had been unchaste. The agony of that discovery and the terrible scene that followed will never be forgotten so long as I live. Charity, she denied the act until I confronted her with the evidence of her guilt. I threatened her with proceedings for divorce, and that threat brought her to confess everything. I must inform you that, as much as the publicity which the divorce court would give her conduct, she feared the anger of her aunt, with whom she was a favourite, and from whom she expected a fortune. I believe that it was the dread of this that made her confess and grovel to me—yes, grovel so piteously and with such an abandon of self-respect that the very recollection of it is nauseating. She prayed to me for my forgiveness as one would pray to God—and I gave it.

"At this time I was an officer in a battalion of volunteers, and my best friend among my brother officers was a man named Pardoe. Frank Pardoe was a man of means, who had read for the career of a barrister. I introduced him to my wife at a regimental prize-distribution, and he became a

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frequent visitor to our house. On one occasion I promoted some theatricals in aid of our regimental band fund. The idea was my wife's, who was passionately fond of acting, and who had often expressed the wish that she had gone on to the stage. Both she and Pardoe took part in the performance : she as the female lover, he as the male. I was prompter, and it struck me that the pair threw an unnecessary amount of ardour into their love scenes. I know that my nature is a jealous one, and, on reflection, I put my view of the matter down to jealousy. That night I mentioned the incident to her, but as she laughed it off with no appearance of guilt, I came to believe that I had had no real reason for my suspicions.

" I must tell you that Pardoe, who lived not far from our house, was in the habit of calling for me on the evenings we attended drill at the volunteers' headquarters. I would wait for him until an agreed time, and if he did not come I concluded that he was to be absent that evening, and so went without him. One summer night when at the drill hall, I was seized with a sudden feeling of dizziness, due, probably, to the heat. I begged my captain's permission to retire, and after a short rest in the orderly room I returned home. I let myself in with my latchkey and walked straight to the drawing-room.

" It is a painful story that I tell you, Charity. That sudden return home revealed to me the extent of my unhappiness and the perfidy of the wife whom I had forgiven for the wrong she had done me less than a year before. The drawing-room door was locked. When I turned the handle she asked who was there ; but my suspicions were aroused and I made no reply. Instead I walked rapidly into the garden until I came to the window of the drawing-room, which opened on to the lawn. I wore a sword, and I broke the glass with the hilt of it and entered the room to discover my wife and my friend in unmistakable adultery. The sword was still in my hand and I thrashed the man with the flat of the blade with such madness of strength that he fell senseless at my feet, while all the time that woman sat shrieking on the sofa."

He paused to carry his handkerchief to his brow, moist with the intensity of his recollections. Charity took resolution to glance at his face and saw that it was like marble and that the hand that held the handkerchief shook with agitation.

" That was the beginning of a new life for me ! A questioning of the servants revealed the information that Pardoe

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had been in the habit of visiting my wife during my absence at drill. For the next week or two I was like a madman, I drank heavily, kept away from my own house in the daytime and resigned my appointment on the newspaper with which I was connected. I kept from the house because I could not speak to her—I could not even look at her. I was afraid of myself—afraid that I might be tempted to kill her. At length I determined to get away from the place and leave the town altogether, and with that end in view I instructed an auctioneer to sell my furniture.

"I then returned home with the intention of telling her what I had done, and informing her that she and I could no longer live together, and that she must return to her aunt. It was nearly midnight, but I found a servant waiting up for me. She gave me a note which she said her mistress had handed to her with instructions that she was not to go to bed until she had placed it in my hands. In my bedroom I read it. It was written by her and informed me that she loved me no longer—that she had not loved me for some time past, and that now all her love was given to Pardoe with whom she was leaving England never to return. She concluded her letter by begging my forgiveness. That is the irony of the adulteress.

"I cannot say that I regretted her action—I had no longer any love for her, but I do know that that night I slept as I had not slept for weeks.

"Of course I could not face the town, and I allowed the sale to go on and left as soon as possible. Since then I have been earning a living in London as a journalistic freelance, always haunted by the tragedy of my life. I determined to go abroad for a time; and a month before I left I received an American newspaper, addressed in a strange hand, with a paragraph marked in the obituary column. The paragraph announced her death, following injuries in an American railway smash. She had sinned against me more than once, and I therefore took no trouble to make any inquiries concerning her last moments. I went to Switzerland hoping to leave the ghosts of memory behind. It was useless; they follow me always. You know what happened to me in the Alps, but you do not know what consolation you have been to me, of how near to forgetting the past I have been when in your society;—nor do you know that since our return the memory of what occurred before I left has come back to me as vividly as ever, because I have learned that she is

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alive, and, in London. What had brought her back to England I could not surmise, nor could I find a reason for the vile trick she was guilty of in causing a newspaper to be sent to me announcing her own death, unless it was the fact that she dreaded that I should expose her to her aunt, but I had too much contempt for her to hold communication with any of her friends. I saw her and Pardoe in Oxford Street a week ago. They evidently noticed me, and must have traced me to the office of the newspaper for which I have been doing some interviewing, because on the day after I met them I was handed a letter by the editor. It was in her handwriting and told me, briefly, that she had returned to England in connection with some business affairs of her aunt, who had recently died, and that she was returning to America as soon as they were settled.

"That is my story, Charity; and that is why you have noticed a difference in me since you came to-day. God knows that I loved you—that I love you still, as much now as ever I have loved. What are we to do? Judge me, for by your judgment I stand or fall as an honourable man."

A silence followed that seemed to be for hours. She sat dumb as a statue of Despair, her eyes glassy and fixed on the floor before her. Bees seemed to buzz in her ears, she heard his concluding question without seizing its import; and when he observed that she had no reply for him, he spoke again in a tone that was almost a wail:

"Won't you speak to me, dearest? Have you no comfort to give me? Tell me, what are we to do?"

She roused herself like one awakening from nightmare. When she spoke her words expressed thoughts that were wholly of herself. Her own misery was at present too intense to allow of room for sympathy for him:

"What are we to do?—Part, I suppose. The Almighty may have ideas of what we are to do. I confess that I don't see them."

She spoke so bitterly that he shuddered.

"But can't you propose anything? I love you."

"What is the use of loving me? You'll have to kill your love. We must part."

"No, no; not that! Anything but that! Let us go away together. We can live in some other country and be happy."

"Never, Euean; if I cannot marry you I'll never be anything to you."

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He tried to take her hand, but impulsively she drew away :
"No, Euean, not that ; you must go away. I'm dazed ; I must think."

"Don't you love me, Charity ? Don't say that you don't. I'm to be pitied. Can't you understand a man's love ?"

"I do love you—that is the cruel part of it. If I did not love you it would not matter. My life is ruined—wrecked !"

"It need not be, darling. Let us go away and love each other always. I can work."

"I'll never go away as your mistress ; I have my self-respect."

"Love is above everything. You would be my wife, by every bond but the legal one, which is nothing to those who love. Men and women have lived happily together without that before to-day. I cannot live without you, and you cannot live without me."

That was the pity of it : she knew that she loved him and could never be happy without him, and the personal thought made her weep bitterly. Her grief distressed him, and when he placed his arm around her waist and strove to comfort her she did not ask him to take it away.

"Don't cry, my darling. Let us be brave and happy together. You have often told me that love may be forgiven much. You have broad views—you have thought, and knowing that gave me hope in speaking to you."

She dried her eyes as he talked, and when he had finished speaking she was ready to reply :

"We can never go on together as we have been going, Euean. The world has limited views on the relationship of men and women. We should not be tolerated."

"But your opinions, Charity !"

"I have friends who would never get over it ; their views would not coincide with mine. I must consider my poor mother."

"But we need not live here. Let us go to some other country."

She shook her head mournfully ; and looking at her he thought how difficult it was to understand the nature of a woman. She had often given him clear and firm opinions on matters concerning the relations of the sexes, but now her action seemed to prove that she was no exception to the common run of women who have not the full knowledge of their own minds.

They sat mute in a long silence, the light of a flickering

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flame from the fire playing elves about their features, and showing them hard set in misery.

His thoughts were sluggish in movement. He had hoped, and he still hoped, though hope was fainter, that he could persuade her to look at his suggestion as he looked at it himself. He had not allowed for feminine inconsistency, and the revelation of it in Charity was a bitter disappointment. Thinking slowly he began to make allowances for her present state of mind, which he saw as a stricken thing unable to grasp anything outside her personal misery.

It was so, she sat taking in the full measure of all she had lost. All was over between her and Euean—love and happiness had fled together, and she saw the flight with despair. She had been too eager; she had loved too much, too violently, too much against reason, and from this she was beginning to experience a terrible reaction. She must bury her love, and seek a melancholy consolation in weeping at its grave.

The realisation of this thought was too much for her, and she rose from her seat and begged him to go. He asked if it was to be good-bye, but to this she would not reply, only she asked him not to stay any longer—she could not bear it. He saw evidence of her grief in the twitching muscles of her face, that she was unable to remain longer in the room, and as she left him he pressed her hand silently. Then, as she rapidly moved towards the bedroom, as if she desired to reach its shelter before her grief broke, he stole quietly from the house.

Grief burst almost before she reached her door, but as the sobs came she turned the key, and sitting on a chair rocked herself in mental agony. She was realising the full force of her thunderstroke, and as she understood all that it meant to her she stood up, the figure of Tragedy incarnate, crying aloud to the deaf unanswering Powers. Oh, what anguish was in her cry:

“My God! my God!”

XXII

SELF-COMPASSION is to be counted with the luxuries of this life of storm and stress. It is often the means through which the human being is saved from absolute despair, by giving a solace that nothing else in life can afford.

Charity's thoughts were still those of self-pity. In the stillness of her room she mourned over her wrung heart. He could not marry her, and in that sentence heaven faded before her eyes. Madness seemed coming upon her; the thought of it made her afraid, and she moaned in anguish piteously; Elissa was on her pile. Suddenly she sprang from the bed, threw herself on her knees and cried aloud to God to let her die. The prayer was a frenzy. She only knew that she was doomed to go through life famished of love. She must give him up—her joy, her love, her God almost.

Ah, God, not that! What had he said? She rose from her knees and lay on her back flat to the bed. She lay still with clasped hands thinking of it, and thinking of the marriage that had been the one object of her life: that she had schemed for this man's love and prayed for it. Would she not now sin for it? It was cruel to have to give him up—cruel! She could not become the suicide of her hopes by doing that. She must think.

She knew that by going to live with him as he suggested she would be thrown into situations where the hard words of men and women would hang, swordwise, over her head; where, perhaps, they would be flung in her face, sharp as hail to sting the flesh and colour the skin. The suggestion led her to think of her life without Euean, and then, by contrast, of a life with him: one was, with courage, a prospect of happiness, the other was the view of a tragedy. No, she could not be cheated of love, which, as a woman, was her destined end—not even if the world were to outcast her for obeying the law of Nature which bade her fulfil her destiny, in preference to the law of Man, which commanded her to deny her love for Euean and go forth, accursed, to lifelong

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spinsterhood. She had played for Euean's love, and, if need be, she would struggle to retain what she had won.

She lay for hours petrified in reflection. She thought of Euean's story, of what he had had to suffer, and she heaped a thousand pities on him then. She could not blame him for abandoning himself to love of her when she had spread her nets for him. What he had assumed of her he had been justified in assuming, when she prided herself on her position as an outlaw from certain rules of conventionality. So she wondered if it would not be the nobler plan to accept his conditions, and give him comfort, and she clasped her hands to her bosom as though she were giving him comfort now. Thought became so deep, that even when a thin sleep stole upon her she continued to dwell upon what he had said.

A pleaded headache kept her from breakfast, and she took tea in her bedroom. Half-an-hour later the parlourmaid brought her a note. She paled as she saw that it was in Euean's handwriting, and when the girl had left the room she tore it open with trembling fingers :

"I must see you. I am suffering. Let me see you if it is only to say good-bye. You can shake the curtain if you are willing to meet me at the British Museum at twelve o'clock."

She sprang from the bed, and looked through the curtain into the street. He was there, pacing the footway. She watched him a full minute before giving him a sign of her presence, and she saw his frequent glance at her window. With shaking hand she gave the signal. He touched his hat as a sign that he had observed it, and from behind the curtain she watched him walk away. Then she looked at her face in the glass : the mirror revealed a tragedy.

Mrs Quarmbly-Smith had brought her tea ; now she came into the room again to inquire how Charity was. The girl was pale, but making her toilet, and when she told Mrs Quarmbly-Smith that she thought that a walk would do her good, she offered to accompany her. Charity found it difficult to decline the proffered company, but her friend's instinct came to aid her :

"Don't you mind sayin' No, love. If you are goin' out on the chance of meetin' Mr Strachan, I don't want to be in the way ; though if he's a hard-workin' young man he may be busy."

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Charity declared that she had received a note asking her to meet him.

"Well, if he can afford the time in the middle of the day I've nothin' more to say, though I think you'd do better in bed with that white face of yours. Don't walk far, and take a 'ansom if you feel tired."

She passed the time until the hour of her departure, in a state of trembling agitation. Outside the house she felt too weak to walk, and, hailing a hansom, she was driven to the British Museum. She found Euean awaiting her on the steps. He raised his hat, and suggested that they should enter the building.

Each viewed a face outraged by suffering, pallid and deep-graven in hard lines. For privacy they walked the dull deserted corridors, neither knowing how to open a conversation. She pretended to adjust her veil, and he saw that her fingers trembled in the act. He strove to cover her agitation:

"Thank you for coming, dear Charity. It is like your goodness. I have been so miserable that I could not sleep. I did not go to bed. I felt that I must see you to know what we are to do, even if you have decided the worst. Love allows no rest; so I wrote. Was it wrong of me?"

"I cannot say that it was, Euean. I, too, have been thinking; and I have to ask your forgiveness for my words of last night. I was mad—and selfish, perhaps. I thought too much of what this meant to myself.—But you, too, have suffered."

"There is no forgiveness necessary. Your words, though they were bitter at the time you said them, proved how deep was your love for me. Charity, darling, has your love for me gone?"

Her voice was faint as she replied:

"No, Euean, not gone."

"Then you agree to what I asked?"

"You must have a divorce from your wife."

"Ah, don't you think I have thought of that already? It is impossible. Divorce is for the rich man, and I am poor."

"How much would it cost?"

"A solicitor told me that even if the suit were undefended, as would be likely, I must be prepared to spend about seventy pounds. That is impossible, as my income is only two pounds a week at most, and I could not afford it. At that time I would not if I could; that was my way of punishing her."

She reflected:

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"Can't we find the money?"

"I could never pay it back even if I could find anyone to lend it."

"I'll go back to the shop and help."

He smiled wintery:

"It would take years of our united efforts to save it. We must live as well. It is like you to propose that, and I am grateful. No, divorce is the rich man's law. We have only one thing before us if we are not to part. I want to begin my life again—and I want happiness. The only barrier to our happiness is a conventional custom. Are we not justified in overleaping it when to do so means so much?"

"You dare the world's opinion?"

"The world has no real care for me; why should I care for the world? I want love—your love. If you set the opinion of the world before your love I cannot ask you to share my life. Don't think that I would influence you, but I thought that I knew your views. It is right that love should influence you. Do you prefer public opinion to love?"

"I cannot always lead the life of a spinster; it is bitterness—bitterness! No, Euean, I choose you; give me your love."

He made a sudden movement as if to enfold her in his arms, but the remembrance of where they were restrained him.

"You make me very, very happy, darling!"

"We have much to face, Euean, to be happy. I have been thinking a great deal since last night. The influences that shape the Puritan spirit of our times are many and intricate, and we have to confront them. Don't you feel the necessity of collecting your thoughts for a few days before taking so serious a step?"

"I have been collecting my thoughts for the last three weeks, and I have come to the conclusion that it is my place to ask you to weigh the pros and cons. It is not enough to believe that you will be happy, one should be sure. We shall have to face poverty—at least until my book is published."

"I have been schooled in poverty, and I can face it again for a time. Your book will make us rich—you must tell me about it. As for what the world says, I care not. We are not malefactors; we shall have only yielded to love, and to yield to the love that God gives cannot be sin. The world is nothing to me, dear Euean, if only I have you. You will

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be just as desirable to me when the world scorns us as you would be if it loaded you with honours. I want love, your man's love, and as you offer it I take it joyfully and am proud of it."

"I thought last night that you were accustomed to talk more than you dare perform."

"I was not myself, Euean. Since then I have had time to consider. My opinions are still the same. We shall strengthen each other; we trust to our mutual love for that."

"You are brave, my girl. I have you, and you are more to me than all else. I can smile at pointed fingers so long as I have you. Possessing your love I feel kinder to the world than wanting it. For your love I dare the world; I dare anything."

"You, also, are brave, sweetheart. Let me hear you say you love me."

"I love you, dearest."

"It is weakness of me to ask it; but I love to hear you say 'I love you.'"

"I love you, love you, love you! There!"

Seizing a secret moment he kissed her.

"You will never regret, Euean?"

"Never, never!"

"Then I am happy."

In his satisfaction at her decision he had a feeling akin to flattery that this woman offered herself to him as a glad martyr in the cause against perpetual maidenhood. He reflected that the offering of herself as a sacrifice for the emancipation of her sex was evidence of her splendid qualities as a free-thinking woman. Looking at her action in its noblest sense he told himself that it was a thing done for female humanity's sake. In reality she was serving the world in accepting the conditions of the life proposed to her. No just man or woman, knowing their case, would condemn them. Their love, constantly on trial, would sanctify their action. These were his thoughts, and he spoke of them to her.

"We go against no law of heaven, Euean. Christ did not institute marriage. You have read Tolstoy?"

"I do not remember the passage to which you refer. To me it is a real sin to live in defiance of Nature."

"Tolstoy points out that men, wishing to feel themselves justified through the custom of external teaching, constituted

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an external code of Church doctrine in regard to marriage which has supplanted Christ's teaching of the ideal."

"Men and women must have ideals to lift them up, and an ideal in love is the greatest of all."

They talked of future plans, and discussion satisfied them that their first thought of seeking a home abroad would not be compatible with Euean's work in English journalism. The suggestion came to him to propose the marriage ceremony to escape the world's censure of their action. Not until he reminded her that the ceremony of marriage was man's invention would Charity agree; and then she discovered cause for wavering in the remembrance that Mrs Quarmby-Smith had promised to pay the expenses of their wedding. He found her new objection difficult to overrule; but the thought came to her that she might write to her parents to say that she and Euean would be married by licence away from her home to save her father the undesirable expense of a semi-public wedding. She considered that she could do this with honesty, inasmuch as she could not bring herself to tax the resources of her parents in any unnecessary way. It would be a sore trial to her woman's nature, that delighted in the circumstances of social ceremony; but for love's sake she told herself that she would be willing to seek the back-door entrance to the attainment of her desire, rather than run the risk of the publicity which the acceptance of Mrs Quarmby-Smith's offer would call.

He agreed to all that she had to say in place of a better plan for their deceit. Passion did much to convince him that her suggestion was sufficient, and he told her that when the end was love the means justified it. The condition of happiness when it reaches a low ebb through the looming fear of a coming crisis was their present state of feeling, though, beyond that, they looked to the smooth waters of a descried felicity.

XXIII

CALL we marriage a human necessity, then love is Nature's stern demand. Without it is no joy in living: we are pitiable creatures wanting air, sun, food, water, raiment. Man's love for the woman, woman's love for the man, or we perish.

The ceremony of marriage had been performed, and with their entrance into a little cottage, chosen in Pevensey of Sussex, new life for Charity and Euean began. The sun had shone on that day, though dimmed to the girl by the remembrance of the receipt of a tearful letter from her mother, suggestive of disappointment at her absence from the wedding, but plain in expression of wishes for her darling's happiness. Her father had sent ten pounds, her brothers five collected among them, Faith and her husband had given her a suite of furniture, and good Mrs Quarmby-Smith, expressing disappointment at being cheated of providing the wedding, had insisted on furnishing the remainder of the house. She spoke of Charity's departure from her home with eyes at the swim: "I know that I shall miss you, Charity, love; and my niece is not you. But if you can only get successfully over the first year of your married life you ought to be 'appy. I know from experience that the first year is something of a cat-and-dog business. I 'ope that you'll always air the sheets before puttin' them on the bed; and when I get back I won't forget to send you the receipt for tea-cakes which I promised."

Wanting sufficient money they had affected to despise a honeymoon trip. "When your book is published we will go to Switzerland together, Euean. I should love to cross the Scheidegg with you again. We'll go earlier in the year to see the Alpine flowers; and the sunrise on the Wetterhorn. Can't you see it now! I am sure it will be all so different when we go there together."

They ate breakfast with young appetites. Their spirits were magnificent as they planned the day's business. She was for the household duties and garden work, he for the pen that was to emancipate them from poverty. At the last mouthful the table was cleared, and, with short dallying intervals, when he must visit her, or she must come in to see

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him, they worked for hours with zeal, pleasure, hope and happiness.

For most part the evenings were for cards, dominoes, chess or conversation. Life was ideal while they had bread and meat. "I have you, and you have me." Poet never gave so fine a line.

They talked of poetry. Euean called the poet a creator—the maker of a world where the human mind comes nearest the spiritual. He thought that true poetry clarified the intellect, as the fine spring morning whips the blood to vigour. His own literary effort was to be a tragic poem on the downfall of a human life. He named it "The Death of Love," and his life with his first wife was the theme. Charity felt a small doubt at his wisdom in the choice of subject :

"Don't you think it a dangerous thing to make your personal misfortunes and private griefs a marketable commodity, Euean ?"

"I consider that true art lies in the faithful depiction of human nature and passions rather than in the sham emotions of the poet or novelist. That is why I think my book will be a success."

"You may be right, dear ; but I think that I, also, am right when I say that your 'sham emotions' are often real art to the discriminating public."

"The public don't discriminate—they swallow. If you have the literary power to move to laughter or tears success is assured to you. For my part I would never condescend to tickle a public's long ears ; there are still those among it who can appreciate genius, and on them I rely. I think my book will sell by thousands."

His quiet enthusiasm caused her to pin on him a master poet's halo :

"I think so, too, dear ! If it does I'll have a fur coat for the winter."

He smiled and promised it.

Under the influence of contentment her personal beauty developed wonderfully. Euean was proud of her in every way. No disturbing thoughts of their relationship marred either's happiness : she was to him as a loving wife, and he to her was a devoted husband, for both were deeply in love.

At Charity's own suggestion they had instituted their *ménage* without a servant. To light fires, pump the water from the well for household use, to black their boots, and even to help her in cleaning knives and washing plates and

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dishes were things looked upon by Euean as playtime amusements, but when he saw her with bare arms deep in the suds of the washtub, and noticed how fatigued the exertion made her, he revolted on her behalf and declared that they must afford a domestic help.

"We can get a small maid for ten or twelve pounds a year, Charity, and I don't see why you should ruin your good looks by such hateful drudgery as this for the sake of saving so small a sum."

"It would be cheaper to get a woman in the village to do the washing, Euean. It would cost us another ten shillings a week to keep a girl. A healthy girl's appetite is sure to be disgustingly good."

"But we must afford it for a short time. It won't be for long: my book will be finished soon, and then we shall have nothing to fear. Besides, I'm rather tired of cleaning boots and lighting fires, and I positively hate seeing you black the grate."

"I've an idea, Euean. There used to be a poor woman in our village named Eunice French, whose lover deserted her when she was going to have a baby. I might write and ask her to come. She was making a meagre living by needlework when last I heard of her. I think that if I asked her she might be glad of the position, as she used to be very fond of me. We could get a room for her and her baby somewhere in the village, and she could come in every day and do the rough work. I think with what we could afford to pay her, and other employment she might get here, she would make a better living than she was doing, and is now, for all I know. I daresay that she would have no difficulty in obtaining charring work in the village. I can ask Mr Phipps to recommend her."

Eunice French replied with an immediate acceptance. In her letter she told Charity that she had been in terrible trouble. Whooping cough had claimed the life of her child, and although her mother had relented under her daughter's blow, she, being old, and now in receipt of parish relief, was unable to help her. Her Alfred Mephram had passed out of her life on his own deliberation, and when she had received news that he had been drowned while bathing at Gibraltar, her grief, though genuine and deep, had been short-lived in the recollection of the long torture she had suffered following her treatment at his hands.

So Eunice French came to Pevensey, and took a small

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room in a gardener's cottage, a hundred yards from Charity's own home. A few shillings a week and meals for her services rendered the woman grateful, and her delight at renewing Charity's acquaintance was not without a touch of pathos. When, in three months after her arrival, Charity was able to secure her the weekly cleaning of the church, through the goodwill of the Rev. Mr Phipps, the poor woman was able to feel that her life was riding at a peaceful anchorage.

She had brought Charity messages and presents of farm produce from her mother, and gossiping while they both worked, Charity came to hear of the hardships of this woman's life, and gradually drew from her the measure of the love she had borne for the man who had treated her so ill. It was with foreboding that she heard from Eunice of her own mother's declining health, and her mind had no ease until she had received an answer to an anxious letter, in which the mother told her that she was a martyr to the effects of her woman's decline. That, she read, was the reason why her parent felt unable to visit her, but her hope was strong that Charity would soon be able to bring her husband to make the family's acquaintance and receive their welcome.

Euean soon found that Charity had yet to acquire perfection in the domestic arts of the kitchen. Oven and frying-pan struggles were viewed at first with feelings of light amusement. When the potatoes came hard to the table, and the meat trickled blood freely at the cut, he made excuses for her, she echoed them on her own behalf, and the two consoled hunger with bread and cheese. Her early life with her Uncle Ticehurst, and afterwards in the Brighton shop, was good enough excuse for the neglect of branches of kitchen science and domestic economy, her preference for books to brooms was more. Past visions of herself in the future had been pictures of her own person surrounded by ease, comfort, and luxury. She had never been able to imagine herself at domestic needle-and-cotton work. Discipline of that kind was antipathetic to her nature. The desire for the pleasures and luxuries of life had been ever entwined with other ambitions, and even in the life she had now chosen, when to fulfil her desire of a male companion and a man's love, she had decided to revert to the state of poverty, there were daily occasions when her nature reached out to her ambition of a life of ease and pleasure, with confidence of its ultimate attainment.

If she had accustomed herself to connect marriage with romance, she none the less looked upon love without ambition

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as little better than a physical frailty. Ambition was, therefore, the mental tone necessary to raise a physical desire to a higher plane. Her thirst for luxury she summed up in the word ambition, and by her own logic ambition had excuse for its existence as part of her nature.

Thus the early life of the two together was one of honeymoon happiness. She loved Euean with passion. To her, love without passion seemed an impossibility: it was her justification for the position she had assumed. She had immolated herself for her God-given love, and, upon examination, she could spare no regrets for the step she had taken. With both love, as thirst quenched, was satisfied, and to each life had never seemed so good as now.

The long spring and summer days were pleasant pages in their present history. A short trip to London, there to be the guests of Mrs Quarmby-Smith, was an important event to be looked forward to, and the pleasures of the visit afforded a delightful theme for after conversations. The holiday whetted Charity's appetite for the gay life upon which she had determined at the time when the world would be ringing with praises of Euean's book.

They had made no village friends, and up to now none had been desired. Euean was looking forward to the autumn and winter as the time for the completion of his work. When at last the long evenings arrived, Charity welcomed them with almost as much satisfaction as he did.

But to her their realisation grew to a monotony. Night after night she would sit at the fireside thinking over an open book, and watching him where he sat, filling sheets of paper under the light of the lamp. The noise of small movements irritated him when he was in creative humour, and when she cracked a page of her book in the turning he would start nervously, and comb his fingers violently through his hair as the thread of his thought was snapped.

It was on these occasions that, with her quasi-Oriental love of vivid colour in life, she came to detest the country evenings, to long for the rattle of cabs, the cries of town streets and the glare of lights. She found the silent companionship of a devoted lover a poor satisfaction for the less intimate society of a multitude, in sheer sickness for which she would often leave him at his work and quietly steal off to bed.

Even the reading of fiction became monotonous. The necessity of entering into the lives of other persons became intolerable, because they were subject to events so different

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from those she herself experienced. The effect produced by her reading was the wish to break from the confines of a mere existence and live herself. All the persons in these novels were men and women of action; they did something good or bad; but she could do nothing. It was hateful.

Euean wrote the final line of his poem at last, and they marked the completion by the extravagant indulgence of a bottle of champagne. Revision remained to be done, her opinion had to be taken on passages, and pages had to be recopied. Three weeks more and the parcel of manuscript lay before them, packed and labelled for the post.

"We can thank God that we see the end, Charity, dear. Our purse is low, and we must look to this to replenish it. As soon as it is accepted I shall ask the publishers for an advance, and we'll have a week in town together. We'll stay at a good hotel, and you shall do your shopping in a victoria. You'll look like a queen."

She imagined herself sitting in it, but merely called him, "Silly boy!"

"I feel that I have reached the climax of my life in the completion of this book, Charity. I have undergone experience, thought, suffering and toil for it. If there is anything in me it is in this, the apogee of my life."

His hand was laid upon the parcel in almost affectionate caress.

"Even you do not know all that this work means to me, dearest. Money and the praise of the critics are things that I desire, but most of all I desire the appreciation of the cultured. I covet a wreath—not at the hands of flaccid folk who devour books as if they were daily newspapers—but the praise of men who have lived, and wrestled, and who can admire intellect and genius, who can give thought for thought, and who are willing to analyse motive and action with their author. Those are the readers I wish for, and to gain them I'd willingly forego riches. I desire the position of an aristocrat in art, and to reach that one must climb the topmost pinnacles of thought. My work has many faults, but the men and women I wish for readers will know how to forgive them."

She could not but agree, though in imagining him at the time when success had come she had a picture of a praised hero surrounded by the advantages of wealth.

He took the manuscript to the post, and registered the posting.

XXIV

HOPE is an animating food elevating the possessor, though often allowing reactionary moments. Now began a month of waiting that was prelude to the publisher's decision. Though not fearing the result, the time was not without anxiety to both Euean and Charity. "Suppose—?" was a thought not daring to go beyond the word. They had good cause for fear, their last sovereign being reduced to shillings.

In his eagerness to complete his book Euean had, of late, neglected the little cruse of journalism that had supplied the meal and oil necessary to their existence. He now sought subjects for popular articles, wrote feverishly for a fortnight, and earned five pounds.

One morning the postman's summons at the door took Charity there to receive a letter. The envelope bore the publisher's imprint, and a fine crimson of pleasure instantly flooded her face. She called excitedly to Euean:

"Accepted! Oh, you dear, clever boy! I could devour you with kisses!"

His face was white as milk, and the letter trembled in his hand.

"Let me open it, Euean. You look as pale as my poor father once did when he received a summons for rent due."

She tore at the envelope, and read the inner sheet. She laid it on the table, and he saw that she, too, had gone white.

"Fools!—Why—!"

But she stopped to watch his face as he took the letter and read it:

"We have gone through your manuscript poem entitled 'The Death of Love' with interest and pleasure. We regret to say, however, that owing to the present unsatisfactory state of the literary market for poetry we are unable to see our way to publish the work. If at any time you should bring yourself to write a novel we should be pleased to read the MS. if you care to forward it."

"The MS. of 'The Death of Love' follows by parcels' post."

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He crunched the letter in his hand, and she saw him reel and clutch at the table's edge. He sank to a chair, and her arms were immediately round his neck:

"My poor, dear love! Don't give way like this. There are dozens of other publishing firms, and we can send the manuscript off to one of them as soon as it arrives. These people speak well of it, and that should give you hope."

"I was so certain—I'm crushed!"

"Every artist has obstacles in his way, Euean; and genius is bound to be recognised in the end."

"True. I'm foolish. You are right, it is bound to go. Give me a kiss. It is weakness to be overcome like this. Other men have had similar disappointments."

"Nearly all, Euean. Look at Hawthorne and Poe. Then there was Otway the Sussex poet, and Keats, and a hundred others. These people who have returned your poem will regret it yet. I'm not downcast in the least."

Her words warmed him, and when the manuscript was delivered, with its fair sheets unkindly curled at the corners, and soiled with the unconsidering reader's fingers, and she had smoothed them with a hot iron, and cleaned the dirty pages with bread, his disappointment was dulled, and he spoke of the work with renewed hope.

"Your idea of renovating the manuscript is splendid, Charity. I quite agree that a dog-eared appearance might prejudice another publisher against it by giving him a clue to its previous rejection by another firm. A fresh sheet of brown paper to wrap it in will help the illusion. Then for the post and better luck!"

"I send a prayer with it, dear."

"Then I have absolutely no fear!"

The waiting was more feverish than before, but he managed to write an article and review a stack of books. The article was declined, but the reviews, being commissioned, brought in a sum of three guineas.

"This slow way of bringing grist is very discouraging, Charity. I must sell these books for what they will fetch. I'll write more articles."

She thought that she caught a view of the wolf, and the fancy made her glum.

"Couldn't you write a novel, Euean?"

"I have never thought about it. Besides it would take time—a year, at least—and we must live."

"I mean a sensational one—a serial for one of the half-

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penny papers. It would be playing literature low, I own, but you might write it under another name."

"I could never bring myself to it. I've no ideas for that kind of writing, and I'm glad of it."

"And our rent is due in a fortnight, Euean."

"We shall hear from the publisher before then. If not I'll write to him."

She turned from him, and sought to see the wolf, wilfully.

"You are beginning to worry, Charity."

"I have had to face poverty before, and I know what it means."

"We sha'n't starve, dearest. If you'll promise to cheer up I'll write to the publisher to-day, and ask him to hurry the reading."

He wrote, and received news that he might expect a decision in a few days. A week later the poem was returned.

It was sent to another firm with the poor blessing of the spirit of dejection. The shadow of real necessity loomed black, and, under it, Euean took his dress suit to a pawnshop at Hastings, and the better-spared half of his stock of books to a dealer. On his return Charity, high spirited, told him that she had received an invitation from Mrs Quarmby-Smith for them both to visit her in London for a week.

"It is the beginning of the season, Euean, and she promises us a splendid time. Her niece, Mary Ann Mallington, will be staying with her, and she has offered to take tickets for us for a charity ball at the Mansion House if we will go."

"That is impossible in our present straitened circumstances. You'll have to thank her and make some polite excuse for declining."

"But I thought that if we went we should find it cheaper than living here. Our only expense would be the railway fares."

"You forget that I have pawned my dress clothes. I could not appear at a ball or dinner without them."

She had forgotten, and her face, poignant to tell her feelings, showed him that his words had brought her disappointment. He endeavoured to smoothe it away:

"Never mind, sweetheart. It is only a matter of a few months, and I may be able to afford you anything you may wish for."

"But I do mind, Euean. It seems hard lines that I can't have a little pleasure. Heaven knows that the winter has

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been dull enough with its hateful long evenings. How can you expect me to be satisfied when we haven't a friend in the place? Even the parson has stopped calling—because he finds that we don't help to support his church, I suppose. Do you think it's reasonable to expect a woman always to forego the society of her own sex?"

"I have no friend here but you, Charity."

"That is the remark of a selfish man! You sit at the table every evening buried in your work, and combing your hair with your fingers, without a thought of me. I could tolerate that if I had someone else to talk to."

"I'd much rather talk to you, but I must work if we are to live. You must try and find a friend. There's Mrs Ottley and her daughter; why can't you get to know them?"

"Do you think I can go and beg that stuck-up hag, with her nutcracker jaws, to come and call on me? Really, Euean, your ideas of etiquette are positively gross! Fancy Mrs Ottley driving down to a cottage in her carriage and pair to pay a social call on such as us! I can imagine the look on her solemn footman's face when he opened the garden gate, to find that it is only hanging by one hinge! If I saw her coming in state I declare that I should imagine she was bringing us relief in the shape of tickets for blankets and coal!"

"Yes, dear, but things will be different when my book is published. Then——"

"When! In the meantime we're stale and starved, living each day like its predecessor, and like the day that is to follow. Hope is a fine sentiment to those who can afford to contemplate it; the only thing that I have to say against it is that it doesn't satisfy present necessities."

"I know that you have good reason to complain, Charity. Now, if you don't mind going to London without me I shall be pleased for you to go for a week. I'm sure that the change would be good for you."

"I wouldn't go now for anything!"

He turned from her with a sigh, and she sat down to decline the invitation, placed the letter on the mantelshelf for the morning's post, and sulkily retired to bed.

Next day the early postal delivery was abnormal on account of the numbers of letters addressed to Euean. His manuscript was the most conspicuous, and such was his humour that he threw it unopened on to the floor beside the grate. There were three or four tradesmen's accounts, two written

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requests for immediate cheques, and a letter from the landlord's solicitor asking for the quarter's rent. A postal order for a guinea, from an editor who had accepted a short poem, came as a note of irony which was not lost upon Euean. Temper and bitterness, struggling for place, exposed themselves in words. He made the breakfast an excuse:

"Eggs again!—always boiled eggs! I wonder you haven't learned that there are other things to eat besides eggs."

"There are if you can pay for them. We have eggs for breakfast because they are cheap."

"There are other things equally cheap if you like to look for them. Of course if you don't want to trouble yourself with a little cooking I must put up with boiled eggs."

"I don't profess to be a cook; I consider myself above that."

"No, you don't profess. A shop-girl is above a cook, according to some people's ideas. To my mind the cook is the more useful person of the two."

The unexpected insult sprang venom in her blood. She was an immediate flare of passionate rage, and she gathered herself for battle, the signs a face at the flame, a tightened lip and a compressed bosom at the point of explosion:

"You taunt me with that, do you! Then I'll tell you, Euean Strachan, that I consider that I have condescended in coming to live with you. Thank God, I'm not tied to you and this pigsty life for ever! And as you can't compel me to remain I'll go, and give you the opportunity of finding the cook you prefer as a mate. That is evidently the only kind of woman you are fitted for!"

She glanced at him with white repugnance, strode from the room with the air of a tragedy queen, and closed the door with a bang that caused a shivering of the table crockery. A minute later he heard her tread in the bedroom above.

He had the immediate sensation of the self-acknowledged brute aware of his brutality. The prompt thought urged him to run upstairs and cry for pardon, but a restraining reflection told him that her proud spirit would reject the suing until an interval had allowed her sense of reason to plead insidiously in his favour. Remorse spurred him to pace the room for its ease, and while he strode, listening to her footsteps as she moved across the floor above, he cursed the devil of his temper for the charge he had against it.

For half-an-hour he submitted to self-scourging, then a sound above, as though a box were being dragged across

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the floor, prompted alarm lest she should be in earnest to carry out her threat of leaving him. Such a punishment he could not bear, and, suspending further internal condemnation upon his conduct, he ran upstairs to the bedroom.

Charity, fully dressed for the outdoor air, was engaged in packing her box. Each article was determinedly placed in it, as though she wished to show there was to be no turning from her purpose. She had not raised her head at his entrance, but while she bent over the box he caught a glimpse of the lower half of her face under her hat, and saw that her mouth was drawn hard like the mouth of the Sphinx.

He took the manly course of pretending oblivion to these outward signs of her humour, and moving to where she stooped, he placed an arm around her waist :

"I have come to ask your forgiveness, dear."

Her feminine obstinacy would not allow her words, and she removed his arm with an impatient hand.

"Charity, darling, I love you."

She brought herself to glance at his face, and the view of it broke her. She burst into tears.

"Oh, Charity, dearest, it pains me to see you weep. Don't, my girl! Punish me—punish me as you will, but give me your forgiveness."

She wept silently, still mindful of the insult. He kissed her cheek :

"Charity, I'm only a man, and I have the brutish instinct. I want you to forgive me, and help me. Temper has been my curse ; and when you came to live with me I swore to myself that I would never give way to it. I find that prescience is not a quality of mine ; I was weak to give way, and I ask for your forgiveness and insist upon punishment."

He spoke so earnestly that her tears ceased to flow, and she looked into his face :

"I forgive you, Euean. You were cruel ; but to seek revenge on you is not in my nature."

"I intend to be punished. I was cruel, and cruelty should be punished. I have prepared my own punishment ; and I shall expect you to agree to it."

She was curious to hear further, but his humiliation touched her, and she returned his embrace :

"Let us forget this little incident, Euean. You may not have been altogether to blame. I have been a bear. I'll

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unpack my box, and we'll have a happy day. Let us spend the morning on the downs."

He smiled.

"And if you make it so easy for me we may quarrel in the afternoon. No, I'll take my punishment like a man. It will chasten me. I give my own sentence by deciding to deprive myself of your company for a whole week! I want you to accept Mrs Quarmby-Smith's invitation. Your letter to her has not gone, and I insist upon the visit."

"What! Without you? I could not think of it, dear!"

"I don't want you to think about it. It is impossible for me to go with you; besides, I have so much work. I'll write to Mrs Quarmby-Smith and make my excuses, and tell her that you will be in London on Saturday."

"But——"

"No 'buts'; I have quite made up my mind, and I promise that if you don't go you'll find me impossible to live with."

Her own desire was aiding his persuasion, and at length she consented to go with a reluctance whose insincerity was apparent.

Descending to their sitting-room the sight of the uncleared breakfast-table, strewn with the morning's letters, and the parcel of rejected manuscript obstruding by the hearth, smote Charity with a pang, and she felt that she had been selfishly unkind in agreeing to leave him:

"I really don't see how I can go and leave you here alone, Euean. I shall only be miserable when I think of you. I'd much rather wait until we can go together."

He assumed anger at her pertinacity:

"If you don't go, Charity, I will not write a line! There is much to be done, and I intend to improve some of the lines of my manuscript before sending it out again. I have made notes; and a week will give me the opportunity. Now, no more about it! When your week has expired I will take the poem to another publisher myself, and bring you back with me. We can have a day in town together. There is something for both of us to look forward to!"

• "Well—will you promise not to be depressed?"

"Work is the best tonic for depression. I intend to dose hugely, every day. Besides, I shall write you long letters. We shall have our courtship days again, but without the weary ache of the long parting. Then look to the end of the week when we meet! I declare that your absence will be worth the meeting again!"

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She knew that her desire to go would be hard to conquer, and, giving way to his view, she felt her conscience satisfied.

The days of preparation were a pleasure in themselves. For hours every evening needle and scissors knew no rest. Euean, looking at her, saw her forehead wrinkled :

"What's the trouble, Charity?"

"Oh, Euean, dear, I have not liked to mention it : my evening gown is so old-fashioned, and now that I come to look at it I'm afraid that it will not do for the ball at all."

He looked at her silently, not knowing how to answer.

"You see, Euean, I had it when I was at Brighton. I hardly ever wore it, and I think that it was only vanity that prompted me to buy it. It's a lovely gown in its way, and I got it from Masons' at cost price, but I'm afraid that now it is very much out-of-date."

"Can't you alter it yourself, with lace and other trimmings, or even get a dressmaker to help you?"

"It's impossible to make a satisfactory alteration. The whole shape and style would have to be altered, and that can't be done. Besides trimmings won't hide its antiquity."

"Then I'm afraid that I can't suggest what you should do."

She seemed to muse, her eyes fixed on his face, and he awaited the words which he saw were in her mind. Her tone was tentative :

"Couldn't we get a dress on credit, Euean? The people would not have to wait very long for their money as your book will surely be published soon."

"I am strongly averse from contracting further debts, Charity. I hate the whole system of credit. It always gives people the temptation to live beyond their means. To women it is often disastrous. I don't see how I can agree when we are so heavily in debt."

"So is more than half the world. There must be credit ; there would be very little business done without it."

"There would be less temptations to extravagance. Those are my views. I must leave you to please yourself about a new gown."

"I really don't think I can go to London without, Euean."

He made an impatient gesture, and she saw that his wish was to be allowed to continue his writing.

XXV

FAITES vos jeux, messieurs ! The cult of pleasure generally involves the cult of selfishness ; in selfishness lies the danger to real happiness. Be it so, Charity was ready to play the game. The chance that her return to the life of poverty, when the present interlude of pleasure had reached its end, would bring back the everyday tenor of monotonous greyness was thought of for a moment and put aside. Euean submerged in work had the place in her mind at nights, until his image was veiled by sleep. Before drowsiness she remembered that she had neglected to answer his letter of the previous day, and she vowed to discharge the account by an early rising on the morrow.

It was an almost nightly vow ; and when she came to make the acquittance it was without giving him the interest of small details : her replies to his long daily letters were brief, affectionate with many demonstrative adjectives that were intended to atone for her epistolary brevity, and bearing excuse for their scantiness by reason of the pressure on her time. When he complained she thought him selfish, and punished him by delaying her reply another post.

The riot of pleasure which she found in the London season introduced her to the fever of the life she had so long desired to live. The whole woman in her was urged to happy, delirious recklessness. The vague ancestral yearnings for the physical enjoyment and luxury that had been the birthright of her forebears, and that were, she considered, her own, were realised at last, and she found herself riding on the crest of a wave of triumph. Her heart was kept flying in an atmosphere of continuous dissipation, and her conversation was effervescent. London, with its whirl of wheels, its streets, from which silence was for ever driven, its hourly distractions, heated her blood to the fever-point of her desires, and in the luxurious mist of daily pleasures she experienced a Lotophagic ambition that gave a present forgetfulness of the monotonies of the past.

In a week of such happenings a charity ball at the Mansion

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House was the greatest. Friday was marked with a mental red cross, and the morning and afternoon was the time of little preparations for the night's event that had their own attractions. She passed the day in a shuffle of excitement. It was to be her first ball, and she had decided that it would be a success. After an eight-o'clock dinner she and Mary Ann Mallington retired to a bedroom and lay on the bed for an hour's rest. It was an hour of conversation, and almost immediately, Charity got up to show her gown for the night.

"I have always wanted to go to a real ball, Mary Ann. I have never been to one. You know I was brought up in the country, and never had the opportunity. I've been to evening supper parties with a dance afterwards, but that kind of thing is different: no special dresses, and no music but a piano—a heavy sort of amusement at best. A ball is so different: there is more excitement. There are emotions as well. I always read the accounts of the great society balls in the newspapers. Do you think there will be real society people at the Mansion House to-night?"

"There are sure to be—perhaps Royalty."

"How glorious! Do you know I think this will be the greatest evening of my life."

The modern fashion of dressing females' hair formed a topic. A coiffeur was to call at nine o'clock, and submit them to his art.

"I shall tell him to dress mine with a sweep in front, Charity. The style is not too severe, and suits me. I have a diamond star that will improve it."

"I prefer mine plainer still. In fact, I don't think I'd even mind a knot behind, but I shall be guided by the man. You are lucky to have diamonds."

"I tell you what! I'll lend you my diamond pendant. I have a rope of pearls for myself. Diamonds will be splendid with your gown. I wonder I did not think of it before."

A rapping at the door suggested the arrival of the coiffeur, but the permission to enter was given to a maid bearing a letter for Charity. It was from Euean, but in the anticipation of seeing the necklace she postponed its opening, and tossed it on to the bed.

She received the pendant with unmeant protests at the suggested loan. Protestation ceased with the delight she had on viewing in the glass the necklace clasped round her throat. She knew that she ought to refuse the accommodation, but the image of herself decided her to accept it.

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Mrs Quarmby-Smith entered to announce the arrival of the coiffeur, who would dress her own hair while the two younger women prepared for him.

Charity retired to her own room on the opposite side of the landing, the two girls shouting a conversation through the open doors. Miss Mallington was the first ready for the man's attentions. He proved to be a Frenchman, with an English vocabulary of a dozen words. Miss Mallington sent the information to her friend :

" He says he ' no spik Ingliss.' What am I to do, Charity ? I only know the plume de ma tante, and le cheval de vôtre père. Whatever is the French for the ' Brown-Potter ' wave ? "

" I'll come in a minute and interpret for you, if you like. I know French a little."

But impatient Miss Mallington made a wild attempt to convey her wishes to the artist in hair :

" Avez voo une paire de tongs—poor—poor—mon shevo ? "

" Ah, oui, m'am'selle."

" Then donny mor une grande waive sur le long de mon front, see voo play ! Komprenny ? For goodness sake hurry up, Charity ; the fellow's smirking and bowing so much that I believe he thinks I'm making love to him ! "

She came as a rescuer ; and in an hour they were ready. Charity was an exquisitely finished model of beautiful womanhood in a gown as fair and white as the sun, that clung to her form with the simple grace of the Ionic chiton. It had cost twelve guineas, and she relied on the success of Euean's book to pay for it. It was beautiful to be beautiful she thought, proud of her reflection in the glass, and she only left the view of the pleasant picture of herself when an impatient call from Mrs Quarmby-Smith informed the whole household that the carriage was waiting.

The three ladies had young Percy Mallington for escort, smug and well satisfied in the contemplation of female hearts open to his conquering during the night. To Charity he was shallow and pleasant, qualities that suited her present mood. He sat by his sister in the carriage, and addressed compliments to Charity with levity.

The securing of tickets for the ball had been cause of intrigues and entreaties on the part of Society's women. The Great were to be there, and in order to be there as well, those who were not Great strove devilishly to be numbered among them for an evening. Mrs Quarmby-Smith's application

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for tickets had gone with a donation to the charity of fifty pounds ; and to be royally robed for the event she shocked the eye and called attention to her bulk of body by blazing in a gown as gaudy and flaming as a summer sunset.

They reached the Mansion House, and in ten minutes were in the welter of the ballroom, swallowed by the maelstrom of couples on the whirl. In the midst of this fine company, full-plumed and caparisoned, Charity drew a deep breath and took in the scene. It seemed to have given a sudden blow to her power of speech, but her face kindled at the sight, and spoke more eloquently of her emotions than words could have done. Threading the crowd of voluminous robes, uniforms and sober black clothes under pilotage of Percy Mallington and his aunt, she moved down the ballroom, sweeping the glittering floor. She was one who had dignity of carriage by knowing how to bear it, and she walked with the punctilious bearing of the woman born to regal titles moving in courtly procession. A happy combination of the Venus of Nature and the Venus of Art would be fitting description of her at this moment. Her bearing struck the men, and women turned to look at her gown.

To Percy Mallington's claim of the first dance she made excuse, and promised the next as recompense. She desired a pause in which she might assimilate the spectacle, and while the young man whirled off with his sister she sought the harbour of a peaceful corner under the duennaship of Mrs Quarmby-Smith. The scene gave the guardian lady excuse for reminiscences of the balls of her prenuptial days, but these stories of the past might have been told to adder's ears : the present fair sight was enough for her companion's senses to encompass. She was drinking of bliss, her ears taking in the cadences of the waltz, her eyes willingly the victim of this splendid ravishment. The rhythmical pulsations of hundreds of dancing feet vibrated in her brain, and impatiently she awaited the time of the following dance that she, too, might be floating among the whirl.

The waltz continued ; and Mrs Quarmby-Smith still talked. She dwelt on the medley of toilettes for which the British Society woman has long been famous, estimating them with female accuracy. Suddenly she descried a lady of her acquaintance :

"I declare, Charity, that notorious Mrs Benyon is here! That woman's cheek is positively awful ; you'd think she hadn't enough blood to blush !—Ah, I'd forgotten, you don't know

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her! She's one of the best-known adventuresses in London. She's been on the stage, and has backed 'orses and gambled and cheated at cards; yet only last month she opened a Church bazaar. Why she's allowed here I can't imagine. She comes of a rotten stock. She was a Miss Framley, and all the Framleys are rotten. Her brother Dick made the country so 'ot that it wouldn't hold him, and he had to go to Australia. They *do* say that he got penal servitude out there. I'm told that Major Benyon, her 'usband, can't get credit nowhere and yet she is beautifully dressed! She dances magnificently; it's about the only thing she has to her credit. I'd much rather see her dance than hear her sing: her voice reminds me of my cook using the nutmeg grater.—Ah, Mrs Benyon, how-do-you do? I was just remarkin' how well you dance. This is a young friend of mine, Mrs Strachan—her first public ball." Charity blushed with shame at the unwelcome information. "I hope that Major Benyon is well? Have you brought him with you to-night? No?—Forgive me, my dear, if I whisper that your gown is superb. I shall certainly give your Louise an order for my next if you think that she will do me justice.—Wasn't that young Lord Firminger you were dancing with just now? Isn't he engaged to marry Minnie Patterson?"

Charity had bowed at the introduction, and, conscious of Mrs Benyon's critical gaze, had endeavoured to give her attention to events around her, and when, a minute later, that lady moved away at the claim of a monocled soldier, she watched her departure with careless interest and some relief. Percy Mallington came to claim her for her first dance; and, at its conclusion, she rejoined Mrs Quarmby-Smith with the light in her face telling eloquently of her enjoyment of the new pleasure.

"How do you do, Miss Woodhams. Who would have thought of meeting you here?"

It was a voice from the past, and Charity turned her head with a quick movement. A sudden spread of colour disclosed her embarrassment, staining her cheeks and snowy neck. Surprise was spelt in her face as it were in capital letters.

"Won't you shake hands? You have not forgotten me, I hope."

"Mr Graham!"

"It is I, indeed. Do you forgive this intrusion?"

She had gone white, and noticing the sign of agitation he continued to talk to allow her to recover her calmness.

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"I saw you from the other side of the room as you waltzed by. Do you know that you dance divinely, Miss Woodhams? and I really envied your partner. May I be introduced?"

She had the iceberg's frigidity and her face had assumed a stern character as she presented him in colourless terms. Her lips were still white, but her eyes shone with a strange light. Graham immediately entered into conversation with Mrs Quarmby-Smith; and in an undertone voice Charity asked Percy Mallington if he would partner her in the next dance. Her diplomacy was to seek time for reflection, and as young Mallington whisked her off in the polka her thoughts fermented in the endeavour to work out a plan for her present action.

Her feet ceased to speed on the last flourishing note of horns, and she resumed the peaceful pace on young Mallington's arm, her bosom at the heave. A rapid glance towards the corner where her friends were sitting showed her George Graham still of the group, and yet she had not decided upon the attitude she would adopt towards him. His suavity disarmed her when she would conjure up a phoenix indignation from the ashes of memory. Besides, the accident of pleasant surroundings was an antidote to the bitterness she endeavoured to feel. An assumed frigidity of manner could be her only attitude.

"We won't go back to your aunt just yet, Mr Mallington. It would be a pity to disturb her conversation with Mr Graham. Will you take me to the refreshment-room for an ice? This heat is almost enough to make one faint."

With arms linked lightly they followed in the stream of the crowd seeking ices and champagne-cup. Charity ate her ice slowly, talking with animation to her companion, who, at the next breaking sound of music, fretted visibly for the dance:

"I'm engaged for the lancers, Mrs Strachan. If you don't mind I'll take you back to my aunt. You've finished?"

"How stupid of me! I had not noticed that everybody had gone back. Yes, take me, please."

Their passage at the door was barred by the entrance of George Graham:

"I saw you leave the ballroom, Mrs Strachan—and followed you here to ask for a dance. May I have this?"

Her dignified pose offered him no welcome:

"I'm sorry, Mr Graham, but I think I'm engaged until the time we leave."

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She looked at her programme, and young Mallington, taking the movement as the signal for his liberty, passed rapidly through the entrance. His arm caught Charity's programme as he left her side and flicked it to the floor. Graham instantly stooped for it, and glanced at the list of engagements as he returned it to her hand:

"Your programme seems almost empty, Mrs Strachan. There is no name against the next dance."

Her apostate scarlet betrayed the fiction. She saw that his lips were smiling.

"You'd rather not dance with me, perhaps?"

"I——"

"Shall we talk instead?"

"I'll give you the dance, Mr Graham."

She returned to the ballroom on his arm. They found that the first figure of the lancers was half completed.

"I think we are condemned to conversation, Mrs Strachan. You see I have heard of your marriage. Mrs Quarmby-Smith has been talking. I want to congratulate you. If you wish to go back to your friends I'll make my congratulations brief, and take you to them at once."

She glanced at his face, and saw that it bore the look of the effect of a blow under repression. She had to answer him, and she curtailed her feeling of wonderment that she should do so pleasantly:

"It is two years since we met and much has happened."

"Yes, much has happened. Much has happened to me. I have grown older."

"I, as well—and wiser."

He glanced at her face and bust, fixing his eyes momentarily on the tremulous sparkle of the diamond pendant, rising and falling on her breathing chest.

"You have not changed for the worse. Time is kind to some women."

"I found a grey hair yesterday. Age is my greatest dread; it is a high wall between young and old."

"You have still many years of youth. That and your marriage should banish fears of the kind you speak of. Shall we sit down?"

They sought quiet chairs, and he kept her attention. Her thought of frigidity dissolved in the interest of his conversation:

"You have not heard that I lost my father a year ago?"

"Not dead?"

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"Yes,—poor old dad! The after-effects of influenza claimed him. He showed pluck; and his greatest concern was due to the fact that he was not to see the General Election and his son a Member for the borough."

"Poor man! The killing of ambition is among life's hardest blows. I'm sorry for you, too. Have you abandoned politics?"

"No, I still lay siege, preparing for the assault. My poor father consoled himself for the fact that I was a mere candidate at the time of his death by saying that the Government was fast going to the deuce, and that it would very soon be there. He never doubted my return. But the Government is little advanced in downward progress although my friend, Admiral Sheepshanks, declares that the Liberal Party is as dead as mutton, so far as efficiency goes. You must tell me of yourself. Your husband is not with you, I hear."

"He is the victim of hard work. We are poor, and he is honest enough to wish to earn his pleasures before enjoying them. He writes."

"An editor?"

"A journalist carrying the free lance. He has kept it in rest of late while he turned his attention to a book. He is ambitious, and makes poetry."

"You must introduce me. I have met every example of civilised man but the poet. How interesting!"

"He fetches me to-morrow. He comes up to town to see a publisher, and he will spend the remainder of the day with me. We return home in the evening."

"Then if I may not meet him to-morrow you must bring him to Brighton and have luncheon with me. I keep on the old house and servants."

"Thank you; but Euean is retiring. I wish he were not. He dislikes visiting."

"Tell him that I talk literature as well as politics, and he may make an exception in my honour. May I have the next dance?—it is a waltz."

Apollo strains, dreamily seductive in a waltz by Strauss, came ravishingly, and drew them again to the ballroom. In a moment her pulses were beating rapidly, as she gave way to the pagan joy of the sensuous whirl. Her vitality seemed to have suddenly increased, her face was rapt, she was a bachante drunk of pleasure, and she felt as if she were floating in a world that was an enchantment; yet she and he were merely a poetic couple talking prose.

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Her dances with boy Mallington had been delirious joys ; this, with George Graham, was dreamy, emotive. In a rapturous cloud she thought of those days when he had a greater right to clasp her as he clasped her now. His warm breath fell upon her hair, and she shuddered as she felt it. It awakened her to reason, and she became aware of the tightness of his arm around her waist.

She asked him to return her to her friends ; and they found Mrs Quarmby-Smith talking of supper. Graham was invited to sit at their table ; and presently he found himself there with Charity seated at one hand and Mrs Quarmby-Smith at the other. The supper-room was an orchestra of human voices, and its brightness intoxicated Charity even more than the invitation of the supper itself. She was harping on the strings of gaiety, and the sound of the music was very sweet. The first sip of champagne seemed to increase her vivacity : it was genial to her blood, and she distributed sparkling glances among her neighbours. Wine was the ichor of pleasure ; pleasure was the joy of life. In a moment of suppremer joy ignition to her excitement was given by a light word from Graham, and she let fly a peal of laughter, with an instant alarm at her own explosion and a blush lest she had betrayed her dignity.

Sight of the blush, that signalled her confusion, gave Graham amusement. He turned to smile upon her :

" You are enjoying yourself ? "

" So much so that I am afraid that I forgot myself. Did it sound very vulgar ?—my laugh, I mean."

" I thought it delightful."

" You see I still advertise my country breeding."

" On the contrary you bring the refreshing country breeze into this stuffy London pleasure room. I'm sure Mrs Quarmby-Smith will agree."

He turned to that lady that she might hear the sentence, and to show her some attention, but observing her deep in a survey of the gown of a dowager duchess who was seated at the opposite table, he did not repeat it. He turned his head to Charity and spoke in a tone modulated to her ear only :

" I think you are almost perfectly happy. The presence of your husband is, perhaps, the one thing wanting to complete happiness. Am I not right ? "

" Yes ; poor fellow ! I have been wondering what he is doing while I am selfishly enjoying myself."

The statement was an unconsidered fib. Hitherto, this

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evening, she had had no room for thought of Euean, and the passage of the present thought of him was as rapid as the flight of a bird from tree to tree.

Looking into her eyes George Graham saw that they shone like dark gems, scintillating singularly. She sparkled and glittered in his presence, seeming to him a woman made for happiness. His thoughts shuttled, a fluency of sentences was as meteoric rushes through his brain, thrilling his body and sparking off his tongue with firework brilliancy. She was splendid; and to her splendour was due the frivolity of his conversation. Wine played its part, and the champagne effervescence sparkled out in a wit as volatile as the wine's own bubbles. He refilled her glass, taking the bottle from the hand of the waiter:

"Bollinger '98—an emperor of wines!"

"It is very nice, but all wines are the same to me: I don't know the difference between good and bad."

"I give my word that there is as much difference as there is between a plain and a pretty woman; or, better still—as between real love and mere flirting: one has the blood of passion, the other often leads to regrets on the morrow."

She was silent, and he saw that she was mentally moulding a reply.

"Don't you think I am right?"

The wine-god was captain of her thoughts: her brain waltzed slowly, but she could not resist the opening he had offered, and she showed her thought:

"I think you must prefer the bad wine to the good."

"How? I don't follow."

"Well, if you have now mended your ways you won't deny that once you were a master in the game of playing at love."

The remark was reckless, unwise, and due to wine-given temerity. It was a spear to strike him, and the wound showed:

"I have had the regrets of the morrow. You are wrong; and so was I. My love was sincere and deep, but I knew that my hopes—ours, I thought—would be wrecked if we had married then. My father was proud. He did not know you: that must be his excuse, and, foolishly, I relied on the near attainment of the position I still look for in the world to give me the full mastership of my own actions. I have felt the intolerable meanness of my conduct to you, especially in the knowledge of the superb feat to which I owe my life. Great actions, like great men and women, are the

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few posts that mark a lifetime. My shame is due to the fact that I have not continuously allowed the memory of yours to level my own ambitions. I thought to reach two goals, but I have lost one and have not yet attained the other. I have had to take my punishment."

"I appreciate what you say, but I should be better pleased if you did not refer to it. I try to forget."

"Yes, it seems curious that I should be talking to you like this now, when things are so different; but I am glad of the opportunity of telling you what I thought. I was cruel then, but in the long run I have suffered most; you are married and happy, and if you think of those days at all it must be with dulled feelings; the regrets are left for me. When——"

"S-s-sh! Mrs Quarmby-Smith is speaking."

In fact Mrs Quarmby-Smith was familiarly tapping him on the arm with her fan. A Person of Quality had bowed to her across tables, and Mrs Quarmby-Smith was so vain of the honour that she desired to stamp the dignity of her position upon her new friend. She spoke with a look of assumed aristocracy on her face:

"There is dear Lady Carmichael bowin' to me, Mr Graham. I wonder if you know her? She is the dearest and sweetest old thing you can imagine! I haven't more respect for anyone in this room than I have for her—not even for the Duke himself. There's many a charity that'll feel the want of her purse when she's gone—poor thing! though I dare say that her bequests will be pretty substantial. If I 'ave the opportunity I'll introduce you to her after supper. You'll find her most charmin' and interestin'."

A substantial gift to a charitable institution, on the committee of which Lady Carmichael served, had procured Mrs Quarmby-Smith a five minutes' conversation with her ladyship on a memorable occasion. Since then she had studied newspaper records of Lady Carmichael's charitable deeds, and come to speak of her as an intimate friend. But when Mrs Quarmby-Smith and her party left the supper-room her ladyship's memory refused to assist her ladyship's eyes in the matter of a further recognition.

Charity declined the offer of a second dance with George Graham. She had energy for a polka romp with young Mallington; but it was evident that Mrs Quarmby-Smith had few friends at the ball and, in consequence, dances were intermittent for Charity. She revived at the cotillon, and

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became a sparkling cynosure. It was her success, and at its conclusion she telegraphed her triumph to George Graham with a flash of her eyes.

Lady Carmichael had failed to give Mrs Quarmby-Smith the desired opportunity of impressing her friend with a view of herself in conversation with a woman of title, and now she talked of weariness, late hours and bed. Graham declined a good-night in the ballroom, and offered his escort to the carriage. He walked with Charity :

"I hope that you are not over-tired. You have been a perfect goddess of gaiety, and you'll have to pay in sleepiness to-morrow."

"To-night has been worth it. I have never enjoyed myself so much."

"I've envied you. To-morrow you meet your husband. I'm sorry that I shall have to wait for my introduction. Don't forget that I have invited you both to luncheon.—No ceremony. I go back to Brighton on Monday, and will send you a date. Pevensey will find you?"

He wished her good-bye and offered a cordial hand. He felt the essence of his physical nature pass down his arm to the warm, small, gloved palm that he held for a moment in his, and his eyes met hers in a glance that rested in her own until her eyelids drooped. Since he had last seen her she had grown in beauty and fascination, and his heart was faintly stirred at a recollection. "A woman of such parts would honour the peerage," was his half-spoken thought as the carriage rolled away. He went to put on his coat, conscious of the internal rising of a certain melancholy emotion.

XXVI

IN the splendid Game of Pleasure Charity had played for a week, as one born to nothing less. The whole strain of her bearing had argued a thorough conviction that in Society she was exactly where she was entitled to be. Honey is sweet—she had tasted it to-night; and an hour's review of the night's events, before seeking sleep, satisfied her that to shine in the world she must aim to reach the permanence of the life she had lived during the last six days: the existence best suited to frame her attainments. A thought of her imminent return to Pevensey momentarily damped her, and enthusiasm fell sick within.

She was called to her bedroom door by a knock. She opened it to Miss Mallington, who brought her Euean's unopened letter, which she had forgotten in the excitement attending preparations for the ball. Now she read it in a cooler frame of mind. It gave her the time of his arrival in London on the morrow, and contained the hope that she would meet him, alone, if possible. He was eloquent on account of his poem revised.

The letter threw her into musing. A doubt was beginning to form as to the real existence of Euean's genius. Yesterday she could not have brought herself to deny it, but now it suggested itself as a possibility. A genius praised in the newspapers she connected with wealth, and wealth was inseparable from her desires. Then she thought of the words of his letter. He was bringing an improved poem to submit to a publishing house, and her hope in it was resurrected as she completed her disrobing.

The light extinguished, and passive between the cool sheets, she seemed to be still floating across the ballroom floor. She felt it swaying beneath the rhythmical cadence of myriad dancing feet, and her head was swimming unpleasantly. Then her thoughts once more reverted to the meeting with George Graham, and she began to doubt whether she ought not to have kept him at bay with arctic dignity. She felt that her attitude towards him had been the wrong one, but found an excuse for it in her excitement of the evening's whirl of pleasure.

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Sleep was not yet near, and she had time to reverse her judgment on her reception of her old lover. After all he had explained the reason for his action in rejecting her, and she felt a certain satisfaction in knowing that he had suffered for it. As for herself she had long ago secured consolation in the gain of a man she loved, and loved, she felt sure, with a deep and abiding affection. She doubted if her love for George Graham could, in other circumstances, have been as strong as that which she was satisfied she bore for Euean.

Yet it would have been untrue to deny that George Graham had still a pleasant fascination for her. Her custom of attaching a great importance to the equipages of life—to wealth, position, luxury, adventitious advantages—surrounded him with a halo that it was impossible for her to confer on Euean in his present mean circumstances. Graham was also handsome: his features were stamped with a patent of gentility, his bearing was aristocratic; and the lamp has power to draw the moth. His breath on her hair, and the pressure of his arm around her waist seemed to be realities still, and led her to wonder to what they might have been prelude had her love not been given already.

Riotous pleasure had bequeathed her a headache, and her mood, when she set out to meet Euean in Mrs Quarmby-Smith's hired brougham, was not what she could have wished. It was dissipated in the exhibition of his real pleasure at seeing her, and her headache vanished in listening to the flow of his enthusiastic conversation as they drove to Paternoster Row. The poem was the topic:

"I am certain of it this time, dearest. Since you have been away I have reverted to my evil habit of writing late at night, but the result is worth the sacrifice. I have polished the work until I am satisfied that every line reflects culture. You know that I am conceited enough to pride myself on my sense of literary refinement. I am convinced that the publishers who read the book before had reason for rejecting it, but now I should not be ashamed to offer it to them again. I don't think, however, I will give them that chance, as I feel sure that the firm I am going to see will take it. They have published some of the best work of our modern poets."

She noticed that his face was pale and drawn: marks of the stress of his work. It pained her; and when he came from the publisher's office she began to tell him of the ball, and was pleased to see that he was glad that she had enjoyed herself.

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"And do you know, Euean, I met my old sweetheart, George Graham, there? He still seeks Parliament. I was much embarrassed when he spoke, as you may imagine. I endeavoured to freeze him off, but he was so pleasant that I was defeated in my intention. He is most anxious to meet you, and hopes that you and he may become friends. He knows literary men, but no poets. He is going to send us an invitation to visit him at Brighton when he gets back."

Euean's forehead knotted in a frown. The woman laughed:

"You dear old thing! I believe you are jealous. I declare that if you are we will not go."

"You know that I don't care to know rich people so long as we are poor."

"My dear boy, our poverty will not scare him! Besides, he may be able to introduce you to men who can help you in your literature."

"We'll talk about it another time. You look like a duchess in this carriage."

"You should have seen me last night, dear! You don't know how glad I shall be when we are rich. Ever since I have been staying here I have imagined myself a leader of *ton*."

He laughed:

"Big fish can't live in little tanks, Charity. I believe that you will never be thoroughly happy until we have money."

"Pleasures are my natural preferences. Life is so short that it seems a pity that we cannot have our wishes for a few years. I should like to lie in the lap of luxury for a year or two. I could feel then that I had lived a life, even if my own paid for the pleasure."

"You prefer a short and merry life to a longer one of mediocrity and moderate happiness. Well, I don't say that you are wrong."

"Mediocrity and moderate happiness are things for the unambitious and prosaic. I have ambitions. Last night I wore diamonds. They were lent to me by Mary Ann Mallington. Do you know, Euean, I think that a woman never really appreciates herself until she wears diamonds."

"You are beautiful without them. Gewgaws of that description are the ornaments of those frivolous women who wish to exact an admiration which their own personal qualities do not command."

"I don't agree. The love of beautiful things shows refinement of taste. In some women refinement of taste takes

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the form of beautiful jewellery, dresses and houses ; in others it is love of art, painting and poetry. If a woman has the taste for both she should be numbered among the superior of her sex."

Luxury at Mrs Quarmby-Smith's, and a company that placed him at immediate ease induced Euean to yield to the hostess's pressure that he and Charity should remain until Monday morning. In a day he was wearied with their frivolity, and hailed the hour for the return home with secret pleasure. The reflection that the monotony of long winter evenings was to be succeeded by the bright days of the year, now at the gate of summer, was Charity's poorer satisfaction. But she had hope that the next London season would find her able to take its vortex on her own account. Her faith in the success of Euean's career had revived.

The week in London had served to stimulate her social ambitions, and she found herself advanced in aristocratic aspirations. The little oasis in the desert of her present monotonous existence was the expected invitation from George Graham. She viewed it at a distance, anticipated, and sighed for its attainment. It promised distraction, and her thoughts were continually with the pleasure while she went about her cottage duties, or nursed the flowers in her little garden. She had a fear that Euean might prove a barrier to the acceptance of the invitation when it came, and to ease her mind on the point she, one morning, brought the subject before him :

"I hope that George Graham will not forget his promise, dear. I feel sure that if he invites some literary men to meet us it will be for your ultimate benefit."

"As a matter of fact I have been hoping that he has forgotten. I really do not think it right that you should allow yourself to be entertained by a man who was a former lover."

"That looks as if you do not trust me, Euean. I admit that there was a time when I thought I loved George Graham, and it was only when I fell in love with you that I knew that my affection for him had not been the affection that would have made me happy as his wife. I believe that his position and my ambition must have influenced me. When he threw me over it was my pride that was stung, not my heart that was hurt."

"Therefore I think that the proper feeling you ought to have now should be one of polite coolness in your dealings

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with him. You are not likely to meet him very often, and, to my mind, it would be more decent to decline his invitation when it comes than to accept it."

"I think that an ulterior motive might be fittingly weighed in your consideration. George Graham is a man of influence, he will probably go into Parliament; and although you have genius, genius with outside aid is more likely to lead to earlier recognition than if it has to rely entirely upon itself."

"Help of the kind you hint at is utterly repugnant to me, and against my principles. When I win the public applause I hope that I shall have the satisfaction of reflecting that it comes entirely through my own merits."

"I really think, Euean, that you are too unpractical and uncommercial to get on! Other struggling literary men would dance at the chance. At anyrate I think that you might have some consideration for me. My life here is dull enough, goodness knows! I wonder that I have any spirits left at all! I have been looking forward to this little pleasure, and it will seem very hard if you won't allow it me."

She left the confession to plead her part, and walked into the garden. He thought that he had detected a catch in her voice, and began to wonder if he had exhibited selfishness in his argument.

Fortune's unequal arrangements in her distribution of favours was a subject suggested for Charity's cogitation in reflecting upon the triumphs of her week in London. In this manner the visit had done her injury. She had been allowed a short walk in the gorgeous pageant in which the affluent play the parts, but her after feeling was that of the spectator who stands envious among the outside crowd. It was not without bitterness that she recognised that, at present, she was too lowly to seek readmission to that splendid scene, and a jealous fear that she might not witness it again gave her real uneasiness. On the point that she had gifts to hold a place in Society she was assured; only the want of substance gave her concern, and in viewing happiness at the horizon she achieved a meed of unhappiness.

The bill for her ball-dress, delivered by a morning's post, gave her some discomfort. She had not been able to take courage to inform Euean of her extravagance, and the immensity of the figures staring at her on the formal sheet of account, frightened her in the recollection of their present practically penniless condition. She decided to keep the purchase secret until Euean had heard from the publisher,

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when, she hoped, the letter he desired would offer the inviting gap through which she might approach him.

The invitation from George Graham came at the end of the week, and, solely to give her pleasure, Euean advanced his consent to its acceptance without reserve. They were to go to luncheon—"no formal affair," Graham wrote—and spend the afternoon with him. Charity intimated their pleasure in accepting his kindness, and her spirits bounded up to degrees of sunshine.

A Wednesday morning train took them to Brighton, and, outside the station, she persuaded Euean to engage a hansom to take them to Graham's house. Euean pulled the bell, and her heart beat rapidly when a grenadier butler opened the door. Graham crossed the hall to give immediate welcome:

"This is a pleasure for me, Mrs Strachan. I have endeavoured to coach myself to humbleness to meet your husband, who honours this house as a priest sent by the poetic goddess. Mrs Dean shall conduct you upstairs while he and I make friends."

His manner did not suggest insincerity in the compliment, and Euean thought he had a foretaste of the recognition he awaited from the world. He was pleased, and while Charity followed the housekeeper he took a proffered chair, in full possession of the ease of naturalness to deal with his host.

A rapid encompassing glance showed him that the hall was furnished with licentious elegance. A simple scheme of light blue coloured walls and white woodwork, with replicas of classical statuary in white marble, pleased a mind that preferred simple expressions of taste to mere gorgeousness. The effect warranted a complimentary remark from Euean; and Graham was sincerely delighted with the expressed approval of Charity who, on her return, gave enthusiastic praise.

"I had the place redecorated after my father's death, and was rewarded with a complaint from my old friend, Admiral Sheepshanks, that I had exhibited entirely feminine tastes in the carrying out of my plans. It is the Admiral's humour to pretend to eschew all things feminine—he can bark like a cynic—but I preferred to take his complaint as a compliment. He was to have met you here to-day, but declared that as an unmitigated bachelor he could not face a lady. I offered pancakes—his weakness—for luncheon, and he almost wavered; but I happen to know that it is gout that keeps him away."

He led across the hall to the drawing-room. It was emblem

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to a deification of the senses. The soft warm shades of rose du Barry, carried out in graceful draperies of silks and elegant upholsteries, told of luxury, wealth, extravagance. Charity's eyes made notes of admiration, and she was smitten dumb, until Graham asked her to strike the keys of his piano, a beautiful instrument in inlaid satinwood.

Diana, eager, stepping through glades, graceful of tread, and with restraint in her eagerness not to betray dignity, was one with Charity walking through this modern mansion. Her eyes darted light, features and speech were vivid. Graham saw her glance into a mirror, and her hand quickly alter the pose of her hat to a more impertinent angle. Looking at her he had admiration for her stately, Cornelian bearing. She had the majesty of a sweeping phantom, with an added substantial beauty. Covetousness of her was not commingled with admiration: he accepted her as the wife of another man, which fact, while remembering, no code of morals could forbid his obeisance to her as a woman of mental attainments and splendid physical attractions.

She was with her thoughts: busy with the cultured ways of this manner of living: the distance between it and her own. Her instinctive feeling for refinement, and all the enjoyments that riches make possible, was raised by this view of luxurious living to an ardent longing to become immediate mistress of the power to acquire possessions equally fine and rare. She could not help giving a thought to the fact that once she might have become a partner in all these splendours, and the reflection raised her bosom and expelled itself in an unnoticed sigh.

There came the summons to luncheon, and the solid comfort suggested by a dining-room heavy with oak panels and carved mouldings again drew her exclamations. They were spontaneous and artless, and Graham felt called upon to make a reply:

"This is the only room in which the Admiral grants that I have shown a robust masculine taste. I believe he would have been better satisfied had I decorated the walls with ropes and sailors' knots as emblems of the British Navy, his pet hobby, and the be-all of his existence. You see that I have satisfied myself with pictures. That is a portrait of my father."

He referred to a state picture of the last head of his family, executed in oils, and sunk into the wall above the fireplace. Charity observed it with curiosity, but said nothing.

They seated themselves at the table to satisfy appetite with a supreme repast, served with a refined and particular

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delicacy, including dishes dainty and strange to Charity's palate, and eloquent of the art of Valentin. Champagne was the only wine, chosen by Graham in recollection of the pleasure which Charity had exhibited when she drank it at the ball. It foamed from the bottle into her glass as liberated sunshine in essence, living, leaping, sparkling; and her face sparkled as she watched it. For conversation she started politics, and a lively dialogue ensued between George Graham and herself, in which she made caustic remarks and ventured questions which, hitherto, she had left unconsidered. To Euean politics were almost Volapuk: he was not at ease; she thought that he had the appearance of the plucked bird parading before peacocks, and she had a moment's shame on that account. Graham, tactful to return the compliment, ventured literature, and Euean woke at the name of the topic for discussion:

"The subject is great, Mr Graham; it has as many and far-reaching tentacles as politics itself. Both are of the character of nations—the characters of human beings. Poetry interests me most, and the greatest branch of that section of the art, to my mind, is dramatic poetry. I literally wash my hands before handling a volume of the old dramatic poets."

"I can respect your reverence. In my opinion the power of the old poetic dramatists lay in the custom of many of them of railing at follies and prejudices. Their very portrayals of the vices of their age were but masks behind which they taught virtue."

"I have been more accustomed to consider their plays as examples of a noble literature. If they taught virtue their gross manner must have bred a certain amount of vice."

Charity intervened:

"I think your idea is Gothic, Euean. No play can be dangerous to morals in the man or woman of ballast. Reading does not put evil into one's mind, though it may stir it if it exists there. Even in the gross dissections of such a prose writer as Rabelais one can find good."

"We were talking of the drama, dear."

Graham hid the small reproof by advancing an opinion on Congreve's *Mourning Bride*, and the subject offered them entertainment to the conclusion of luncheon.

An afternoon's rain kept them from the garden, and was the excuse for a late departure, almost at the dinner hour. Rain streamed heavily, and borrowed protections were almost useless. The walk from Pevensey station to the cottage was a misery to contemplate, and it was a half-mile of realised

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misery in the undertaking. The wind dealt buffets, rain smacked their faces, and in five minutes they felt wet garments clinging to the skin. Good humour had fled : Charity's progress was a struggle with flying skirts and a lifting hat, that tugged her hair at the hinge of the pin until her scalp was sore. They gained their own gate martyrs to the day's enjoyment. Euean strove to discover the house-door key, his hands alternately diving into the pockets of his clothes. Patience left Charity at the view of him :

" Make haste, Euean ; I'm wet to the skin ! "

" Can't you see that I'm doing my best ! My hands are damp with the rain, and the pockets are difficult to get into. I expect that I'm as wet as you are. "

She affected a shiver to suggest the martyr's air. He discovered the key, struggled to find the keyhole in the gloom, and drove at the door with his knee. It flew open, and he entered the darkness of the cottage.

" I think you might have had the politeness to allow me to pass in first, Euean. I don't see why you should reserve your best manners for use only in your newest company. "

" I entered first to find a match. If you had not allowed your head to have been turned in the contemplation of a day's excursion you might have remembered to instruct Eunice to light the lamp ; or you might have even placed a box of matches where it could have been found. "

He bumped his way to a window to raise the blind. He was irritated. Even love has no safeguard against the pettiness of irritation ; and Euean was experiencing one of those moments when the strain of life is found difficult to bear, by reason of small things tending to personal discomfort. He gave the feeling expression when he swore at a trifle. Charity heard the word, but made no remark. She was in a mood of exasperating disrelish. To Euean she appeared sunk in bilious gloom. He spoke after a minute's silence :

" We'd better have a fire. To be wet through is bad enough ; I can't afford a doctor's bill. "

" You must light it, then. Coal and wood are in the scullery. I'm going upstairs to change my clothes. "

He changed his own rapidly, maintaining a sullen silence. Then he went downstairs to collect the materials for a fire.

While he was engaged in persuading the sticks to flame he heard a knock at the door. He went to open it, and found Eunice French with a parcel in her hand.

" The postman brought this after you was gone, sir. He

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brought it to me to give to you as he couldn't make nobody hear."

He knew it for his manuscript before the fear was confirmed by a glance at the publisher's label on the face of the parcel. He took it from the woman's hand:

"Why didn't you have a fire ready for us when we came back?"

"The missus didn't tell me, sir."

"One would have thought that when you saw the rain your own common sense would have suggested it."

"But you took the key with you, sir; and I couldn't ha' got in."

He turned his back to her to walk away.

"Shall I light it now, sir?"

"No, you may go. I have done it myself."

He returned to the sitting-room with the impulse to cast the parcel on the fire, but he let it fall to the floor with a thud.

Coming downstairs to spread a cloth for the evening meal Charity saw him on his knees before the grate, coaxing the fire with his breath. A flame lit his face, and by its index she discovered his humour.

"Was that some one at the door, Euean?"

"Eunice French brought this parcel. It is my manuscript returned again."

"You might have asked her to come in and lay the supper-table."

Her indifference to his disappointment angered him. She had not even the decency to give him a sympathetic word on the occasion of a blow so vital. His wrath stood up:

"That's you all over! So long as you have your amusements you don't care a damn how much I toil, nor how often I am rebuffed! You had your week of pleasure in London, and it did not matter to you that I worked myself ill here. I call it damnable ingratitude!"

For answer she raised her chin and, with a majestic sweep, left the room.

There was a half-hour free of words. Euean flung into a chair, and held the daily paper before his face. Charity came back and prepared the table with deliberate movements that marked an attitude of defiance. She signalled the readiness of supper by placing her own chair at the table, and cutting the bread. He waited to be informed of the meal, but the invitation not coming he tossed the paper to the floor, and dragged his chair across the carpet.

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As soon as he was seated at the table he began to give vent to his feelings in words of dissatisfaction :

"Only bread and cheese !—eternal bread and cheese !"

"Beggars cannot afford to choose their food."

"But this cheese is dry as wood, as dry as——"

"Damnably dry !"

The word coming deliberately from her lips startled him ; horror succeeded :

"Charity ! you swore !"

"I said damn, and I say damn again ! Damn the cheese ! damn everything ! I'm sick to death of it all ! I'm sick of your eternal grumbling. If you can't eat the cheese you'd better throw it out of the window !"

"You beast to swear ! That for you !"

He threw the piece of cheese in her face.

His action was like the pouring of cold water into a boiling pot : he calmed down. The woman sprang up, her face deformed with fury. She shouted war in a word, the momentary glitter of a spark in her eyes :

"You cad !"

Then she left the room.

He was cool enough to reflect. An apology would not enter into his consideration when he remembered her want of sympathy, and his attitude to her, in reflection, was stubborn and bitter. That night he slept in his clothes on the sitting-room sofa.

XXVII

THE facts that had led to the position they had wilfully assumed in the antagonistics of the night before remained for the morning's consideration. Casting back her mind Charity was aware that the pursuit of a lover, with its Tantalus delights, had long since come to an end, and that now she had become weary in waiting for new excitements. Her close experience of Euean had discovered him mere man; to him, it was evident, she was only a woman, after all.

The pair were thus on a level in their regard of each other, the cold north light of reason was flooded on to the situation they had to face; and Charity plainly saw that they must continue to tread the path of poverty together. Straining her mental vision she saw to the horizon of the life before her: a dun and dreary desert, without mountains, without stars, without attainment.

Her present mood was a view through smoked glasses. Clearing the dimness by an effort of will she was aware that her faith in Euean's genius was still real, though staggering under rebuffs, and she knew that her part was to encourage him on the way that, she still hoped, would lead to brighter scenes. Yet, she reflected, it would be well that he should understand that her ardour for the goal upon which she had determined was still undamped, and she relied upon the assertion of her belief in his ability to attain it to give him spur for continued effort. To make him subject to the whips of a clear and uncompromising setting-forth of her views was her determination, and a discipline which, she argued, would have salutary effects.

She descended to breakfast. Her eye swept the shabby-genteel furniture of the sitting-room, and she had chills down her back. The leather-covered chairs looked cold and inhospitable, the gaunt long-case clock in oak, and the hard Brussels carpet, with its bold design blaring vulgarity, proclaimed the mediocrity of her life with Euean, and demanded a crusade against such time-honoured manners of taste, while her sense of gratitude to Mrs Quarmby-Smith,

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who had bought them, was, temporarily, considerably diminished.

Euean was not in the room, and she felt a sudden slight alarm, until Eunice French informed her that he had gone for a walk. She seated herself at the table, but postponed beginning her meal until his return.

He was ten minutes late, but, glancing at his face, she discovered an improvement in his humour. Her sentence of greeting was given on one note, that was intended not to betray her attitude towards him :

"Have you been far?"

He replied in an everyday tone:

"No; I went to the rise of the hill. I have not slept well, and I took the walk to set my blood going."

"Was it conscience that kept you awake?"

"Resentment, I believe; I thought that you might have exhibited a little more kindness last night when you knew that I was suffering under a keen disappointment."

"I ought to have done, I know; but I have a hundred disappointments where you have only one. Your single disappointment may be greater than the sum-total of mine, but I have noticed that after a disappointment you recover your spirits in a few hours—in a day or two at most. I am different. With me disappointment is perpetual. For a time I live on hope only to discover that it is a mirage."

"Your experience is little different from mine, Charity. I've passed my years in hoping. It seems to me that all life is a disappointment: youth is a fair promise, manhood is a battle to attain it, and I believe that old age must be the acknowledgment of defeat."

"Your words are no more encouraging than life itself. My regret is due to the fact that I am a woman, and therefore action is denied to me. You, as a man, have that advantage over me. I have sometimes thought that to be a woman is a curse. How many women wish they had been born men! You can't find the man who desires to be a woman."

"You brood too much."

"It is due to my woman's ambitious nature. Sometimes I think until I feel hysterical. Action gives you no time for persistent musing and agonising."

"I think, too."

"But your thoughts are of a different character to mine. Woman's thoughts are purely abstract. With us thought is distinct and independent of action. A man is never satisfied

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with imagination until he sees the tangible fruits of it; to woman thought is often sufficient: it has to be; reality to one, dreams for the other. I believe that to the reason that woman is too often satisfied with dreams is due the fact of the sex's small achievements in art and literature. While you work for money and a name I have to try and be satisfied with visions of success. I have dreamed long, and you must not wonder if you sometimes detect signs of impatience in the waiting."

"Signs of impatience in you afford me no encouragement. Surely you'll grant that the failure of his schemes has a greater disappointment for the worker himself than for the sleeping partner, though that partner may be equally interested? You must have patience."

"Patience! I've been its very monument! It is the monotony of life that is killing my soul! I do the same things, day in and day out, and it seems as if I shall have to do them for ever—the same things in the same way! I want change. It is a fine thing to toil and moil from dawn to dark, is it? I say it is slavery; it makes life a disease, it makes it life no longer—only death! That's why I desire change. At present I am merely a bondwoman awaiting freedom. If I were a man I'd occasionally get drunk. If I could have no other amusement that, at least, would have the advantage of excitement."

"There is the split head and repentance that follow."

"Never mind, monotony would be killed for an hour or two."

"You are not tired of me, Charity?"

"No—not tired of you. I am only tired of monotony—tired of our solitary manner of living. You are not particularly sociable, Euean; you dwell too much with yourself in a world where I cannot follow you, because, I suppose, I am too materialistic. You are a poet, but I am a human being, and I must live a human being's life. In other words I must have occasional excitement."

"I can't say that I appreciate your views for myself. So long as I may write and read and be free of debt our present condition of life would satisfy me."

"You make me lose all patience, Euean! I can't understand how a man of culture can be permanently satisfied with this hard carpet and shabby furniture, and the pairs of ornaments and pictures. I absolutely detest Noah for instituting the system of pairs! This house is nothing more than a testimonial to the low tastes of Goths and Vandals!

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You say that the literary life, sustained on a little oatmeal, is sufficient for you. You are mistaken. In five or ten years you'd be stagnant and impossible to live with. You want to climb a hill and view the world; at present you see it from the bottom of a valley where little light penetrates, and you are becoming myopic and benumbed of soul. For heaven's sake do something to keep yourself from getting sluggish, even if you only get drunk!"

"I try to be a philosopher."

"You are no better than a Puritan! Mine has been a heritage of Puritanism, and I'm tired of it. I want to escape this eternal leaden dulness. We've been reading Herbert Spencer. I admire him because he constantly insists that it is the duty of man to enjoy himself."

"He also says something about the duties of life in that connection. Even if we became rich you'd find that money would fail to purchase complete happiness."

"That is a copybook platitude which you might have addressed to a schoolgirl. All I can say is that money would gain us infinitely more happiness than poverty does. The want of it has wrought nothing but bitterness in our lives. When I think of the power of money I stand agape. I tell you, Euean, poverty is our curse, and I have sometimes asked God what we have done that He should continuously visit us with it. To me poverty is but an interchangeable term with degradation. It also means sorrow, solitude, discontent, and continual personal sacrifices; money means pleasure, joy, friends, happiness—in fact, power. The want of it has kept me awake at night, and made me miserable by day."

Listening to her he was not quite sure that he had not been a brute in bringing her to this. He began to see the dreadfulness of her dreary life, and glancing at the bundle of his rejected manuscript, lying in the corner where he had thrown it the night before, he regarded the future as a graveyard. Immediately the fog of a black melancholy settled on him, and he spoke in blue tones of despair:

"It seems to me that I am an utter failure."

"And I am nothing but a worldling!" Her laugh was wanting mirth. "No, Euean, things are bad, but they are not at their worst. I've still great faith in you, although I showed you no sympathy last night. You have genius, and you are a plodder, and when one possesses genius and perseverance the rest is but a matter of time. Therefore, I'll be satisfied to wait. I think this talk has cleared the road

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to a mutual understanding; and now we'll pull together bravely. Perhaps I've not been as kind to you as I might have been, but you'll overlook it. Kiss me."

He was contented to fall back on the luxury of her faith in his powers of achievement. Her words were a zephyr to chase the fog. It lifted and he kissed her.

During immediately succeeding weeks they took joy of the summer, spending happy days in simple picnics at which they were the only guests. The interchange of thought had served to sweep away barriers that had stood in the way of a thorough understanding. Each, seeing the other's naked heart, had relief, and the course of their lives promised to flow on without disturbing breakers. She had made it clear that love alone was not sufficient for her, and by the expression of her continued faith in his power to achieve her desires she gave him additional faith in himself.

Sweetness of temper was tempted to the quality of sourness by the compulsion of facing the problem of how to maintain respectability on an empty purse. Euean had to confess to a gnawing at his vitals at the thought of it:

"Every bill that comes has a sharper tooth than its predecessor. The butcher and baker take away the results of the daily nourishment they give by sending in their accounts at the end of the quarter. The practice of knight errantry in journalism is about as stunning and unprofitable as tilting at windmills, and the freelance should be as satisfied to fast as Don Quixote after his encounter. Editors are as unyielding as windmills; I have launched three articles in the last month, and have been unhorsed every time. What is to be done?"

The question raised her a corrugated brow, and she was set pondering, beating her brain for a way out of the maze. In the midst of her thought the recollection of the bill for her ball-dress was a terrifying spectre. It urged her to consider a remedy that only sheer desperation could drive her to; and watching her face for moments Euean saw there the light of a suggestion before she gave it to him:

"I've an idea, Euean. I'll go back to business. I can earn enough money to keep us going if I take a full salary instead of my board and lodging; and if you can sell a few articles we shall be able to pay our bills."

He was not prepared to consider this, and the tone of his reply was as emphatic as the words themselves:

"I shall not listen to such a proposal, Charity. It is my

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girl's pluck that makes it, but the man must earn the bread in our *ménage*. Besides when you told the shop-people that you could not live on the business premises you'd be asked if you were married, and if you intimated that you were, they'd have nothing to do with you."

"Well, a 'no' to that would serve the truth, and the chances are in favour of the question not occurring. Plenty of shop-girls live at their own homes."

"But the fact that you were living with me as my wife might be found out sooner or later, whether the actual state of affairs was discovered or not. I'll not listen, I tell you. We quarrel if you mention it again. No, my girl; your quiet presence here helps me in my work. I should not be able to write a line if you were away from me every day. Promise me that you will not speak of this again. Futurity is dark, but we must have a little more patience."

"No, futurity is only twilight, dearest, and we shall emerge from that when your genius is rewarded, as it will be. As you say we must have patience; the retention of patience is, after all, the only trying thing we have to contend with. I'll try to think of a subject for an article. 'Patience and Poverty,' there is a title already! The subject is meet for either prose or rhyme."

The little laugh that closed the sentence was without exhilaration, and he knew that her heart did not join with her lips in the expression of merriment. His own went sick to hear it.

On a morning when summer swarmed in the air she was confused to meet George Graham at Hastings, whither she had gone to make small purchases. Emotion, that startled her from her usual placid dignity, was due to the fact that he should see her when so shabbily dressed on so bright a day, and loaded with parcels like a tradesman's messenger. His gallantry in offering to relieve her of the burden served to deepen her embarrassment, and her refuge was the assertion of a spirit of independence. She declined his suggestion to take the parcels with a slight coldness of manner which he had not merited. The recovery of her equipoise and normal complexion led to the prompt recognition of the rudeness on her part, and she endeavoured to dissipate any bad impression she might have made on him by imparting an immediate geniality of tone to the conversation:

"This is almost the worst thing about living in the country, Mr Graham. You have no shops worth the name, you must

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journey for miles for the ordinary necessities of life, and then you cannot have them delivered."

In answering he turned to walk with her :

" But even the country must have its compensations. The probability is that if you lived in a town you would take little pleasure in shopping as an event of almost daily occurrence. In the country shopping must be a mild excitement to be looked forward to with pleasure. Besides those that live in the country are not bound to be turnips, you know."

" For my part I am satisfied to leave the praise of the country to the poets. I look to time to bring me relief. London for me ; I'd like to live and die there."

" You have never been to Paris, perhaps ? "

" No, but I can well imagine that if I once saw it I should prefer it to London even. I should love to travel ! I like to see life : I want to live in the bright quivering sunshine. The rivers of people and traffic in all the great streets of London always seem to set my blood coursing."

Until he spoke again she was silent, listening to a mental hum of London, which sang a song associated with future triumphs. Graham broke the dream :

" Restlessness is one of the characteristics of the age. Do you think that you would be any more satisfied with a life in London, if you went there to live, than you are with your present existence ? "

" I don't doubt that I should. It is natural to want to know life, and although the country dweller need not fossilise to a turnip, as you say, the circumstances of his surroundings all tend that way. At the same time much depends upon the individual nature. Some people would babble with satisfaction if set in the midst of green fields. I confess that such an existence offers me no charms. The tendency of continuous mediocrity is to crush what is fine and rare in life."

" But you are married, and should be happy. The married state is said to have many compensations."

" It has ; but even love is an unsustaining diet. At Pevensey we are victims to respectable loneliness. We have Nature for company, but I find Nature a bore. It's a mistake to live too much in the country ; your views of life are apt to become narrow and pinched, and I sometimes believe that some day my brain will become as dry as a sponge wanting water. The chase of life should not end at marriage. Properly, it only begins."

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"I think that you will attain your ambitions. The conversation I had with your husband when you came to see me impressed me with the fact that he is a man of potentialities. When will his book be finished?"

"It is finished. He is trying to find a publisher. The cry at present is that the market is stagnant for poetry. Fiction it will buy. Euean, I am sure, could write fiction, but he can't bring himself to it."

"That is the poet's spirit. I should not attempt to thwart him if I were you."

"He is a poet, a dreamer, hardly a human being; but he works hard, and rewards are difficult to obtain. The world is like a miser; you have to wrest the good things from it."

"You certainly need patience. So long as one has not parted with hope one has yet much to lose."

Hope, she knew, she retained, but the waiting! It was that that wearied her, and as she mentally gazed ahead along the path that led to the mountain of her ambition, involuntarily her bosom was lifted by a sigh.

Mentally sailing among the heights of her aspirations she returned home by a midday train, and found Euean sitting in an arm-chair. He appeared to be careworn, and she looked at him with foreboding written on her face. She decided that he was brooding on the ill fortune that attended his literary efforts, but remembering her part she endeavoured to inspire him with her own assumed cheerfulness, and, with an animated description of her morning's shopping, brought the sickly gleam of a smile to his face. When she told him of her encounter with Graham his face dulled again, and she saw that her news was not to his liking. She promptly accused him:

"I really believe that you are jealous, Euean!"

He was: jealous as Othello awakening to the fact.

"Are you jealous?"

"I don't think it is the proper thing for you to be seen walking with another man, in a neighbouring town. If you give people the outline of a picture you must expect that some of them will fill it in with gross colours."

"You mean that people generally prefer the fiction of scandal to the true story of facts. Very well; if you object I will make a point of cutting George Graham when I meet him; but I am satisfied that your attitude is as uncalled for now as mine will be when I repay George Graham's hospitality and friendship by turning up my nose when I meet him."

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He was thinking so too, but for the life of him felt that he could not help his sense of jealousy. He knew her as few did to be pitifully fond of high station in life, and all that high station meant, and although he was not prepared to admit it to himself he scented a danger in her friendship with a man of Graham's standing.

The legal quarter-day had two days passed, and Charity was beginning to dread the rendering of the account for the gown she had purchased unknown to Euean. Man-like he had, in preoccupation, entirely neglected to inquire how she had solved the difficulty of obtaining a ball-dress for her visit to London, and now she knew that the time had arrived when she must acquaint him with the fact that she had mortgaged his credit without his knowledge. She chose an evening for the revelation when his humour was even, and judging to win him by a sudden fascination, she made certain of the absorbing character of his occupation, tiptoed the stairs to her bedroom, locked the door upon her entry, drew the blinds, and illuminated the room with a prodigal display of lighted candles, emptying a full box for the extravagant purpose.

It was to be an exhibition of her desire for effect, and its object the easier revelation of her confession through Euean's anticipated fascination in beholding her arrayed in the splendour of her new gown. Amid the forest of lighted candles she immediately proceeded to dress herself, coiffeuring her hair in the Frenchman's manner. It was a good hour's business, with a five minutes for the pleasant flicker and dusting of the powder puff. She posed before the glass, altered the position of the lights, and posed again, regretting the want of Miss Mallington's diamonds to complete the effect she desired.

Posing, she was alarmed by a turn of the door handle, and Euean's voice without impatiently demanding admittance. She turned the key, and he entered at the gaping doorway. He was white, and seeing his face, stern with repressed thunder, hers whitened equally. He advanced a step towards her, labouring under an excitement that rendered him blind to the effect she had been at such pains to arrange for him.

"I want to know the meaning of this, Charity!"

He held out a white slip, and a glance told her that it was her dressmaker's bill. Her immediate instinct was to fence, and she offered a parry until the time that she might thrust in a point:

"What do you mean, Euean?"

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"I mean that I have received a bill for twelve guineas from a firm of dressmakers for a dress which they inform me they have supplied to you. They say that they have several times written to you for the money, and that as they have not received it they are compelled to ask me for a cheque. I want to know if you have had the audacity to run me into debt when you know that I haven't five pounds in the world. Have you had this dress or not?"

The fiery shower of his words burnt her to anger, which, for the present, she controlled under a reply spoken with some sarcasm:

"You would see if you had eyes."

For the time his rage cooled sufficiently to allow him an examination of her as she stood before him, tall, white under the suppression of her emotions, and regal in her pride and the lustre of her ball-gown. He looked at her without admiration, his gaze moving from her to the lighted candles, and a sudden disgust for the spectacle filled him, causing the flame of his rage to leap at what he interpreted as an exhibition of intolerable vanity:

"You monstrous woman! This is how you help me, is it? So you dress yourself in this fashion to satisfy your miserable vanity! I'll spoil it—by God, I will! You're as vain and contemptible as my wife!"

He knew not the value of his words in this moment of his supreme wrath: he was in a raging gale of passion, brutal as a Heliogabalus, and taking a sudden step he faced her as he spoke. He grasped the bodice of her dress at the opening, where her bosom glistened with alabaster whiteness, his hands strong with anger, and tore it apart in a venting of the full fury of his rage. The rending of the material sounded as the brief shriek of a night bird, and her bust showed suddenly fair, half-covered by her corset. He seized a filmy sleeve, and tore it from the shoulder, leaving her arm naked, and in his madness might have stripped her to mother-nakedness had not the tigress in her turned at bay, and compelled her to resistance:

"Oh, Euean, you brute! You brute!"

The name increased his fury, and forgetting that she was woman, he clenched his fist as if to strike her to the floor, but the array of candles on the dressing-table arrested his gaze. He brushed them to the carpet with a tragic sweep of his arm, and seizing one that still remained burning on the table he flung it at her with "That for you!" The impact

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extinguished the flame, but a thin stream of grease daubed the front of her skirt, spoiling its beauty.

Her stunned ears were just sufficiently acute to hear his tread, as he strode heavily from the room, and awakened the cottage with the bang of the bedroom door. A minute later she was made aware that he had gone out by the duller concussion of the front door. Until that moment she had stood rigid, a waxwork of despair, but now she awoke to life with a start, and viewing the wreck in the gloom of two remaining mantelshelf lights she began to weep aloud, sobbing: "Oh, my poor gown! my poor pretty gown! Oh, it is cruel! It is cruel!"

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XXVIII

WOE to the time when love is deep wounded by the puny blows of life's small circumstances ; tribulation treads after the van when lover and beloved allow the murder of mutual respect.

The cruelty of Euean's violence transformed a woman recently footing the road to despair to a woman of seething revolt. The possibility of overlooking the incident, even if Euean had asked her, was not to be considered. He had stabbed deeply into her pride, and the wound was welling an angry blood which she was not prepared to stanch. She determined upon an uncompromising attitude of isolation towards him, and that night she locked her bedroom door against his entry. He did not attempt intrusion, and when she heard the clash of the front door announce his return, and found that he did not mount the staircase, she concluded that he was adopting a similar attitude towards herself, and was bent on taking his night's rest on the sitting-room sofa.

The breakfast of the morning found them seated at the table in the accustomed facing position. He had not looked up when she entered, and she observed that he had propped the yesterday's newspaper on the table before him. The incident ignited her anger and gave her disgust, and she took a book to her place and bent her head to the open page as she ate. She went leisurely through the motions of feeding herself, bent on a system of markedly irritating deliberation in small actions. In this manner she came to the end of the meal, and, taking up her book, swept slowly from the room with studied processional steps.

She was an hour in deciding upon her next move in the course of marked apathy with which she had determined to show contempt for him. She spent the time in flicking a duster among her bedroom possessions, and during the process had a thought of the attractions afforded by neighbouring towns as a means of taking her from continual rencounters with Euean. Excursions of the kind would afford her acceptable amusement, mental distraction, and a means of punishing Euean by her absence from home. Besides, in

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the immediate smarting of the insult of the night before she had decided to leave him and seek her own livelihood, and either Hastings, Bexhill or Eastbourne might afford her that opportunity. How to excuse such an action to her friends was a point she had not weighed; at present the bitterness of her sop allowed her thoughts to dwell on nothing but the taste of it.

The two reassumed the morning's attitude of frozen silence at the midday meal, the book and newspaper assisting the action. An hour later Charity dressed in outdoor garments and, satisfied that Euean had witnessed her departure, she proceeded to the railway station and bought a ticket for Bexhill.

She found the town a place of placid dulness, with no other distraction offered her than the stare of shop windows. The atmosphere of grey and even respectability depressed her, and she decided that it would not be possible for her to live in a town that she was pleased to think nothing more than a glorified seaside village.

She returned home after the accustomed hour of the evening meal, without having offered her services at any of the shops. She went to her room and took off her hat before allowing Euean to see her, and on entering the dining-room for her meal observed that he, having finished his, was seated at his desk. He looked up when she had poured out her tea:

"I suppose you think it quite compatible with the actions of a lady to take country walks and remain out alone after dark?"

The taste of his words was meant to be tart, and she gave her answer with equal intention:

"It would be quite as compatible as your recent action to a lady. But if you care to show no respect to me I have not lost respect for myself. I have no intention of taking country walks alone. If it is a matter of interest to you you are welcome to the information that I have spent the afternoon at Bexhill."

She saw by his colour that she had struck a bull's eye, and his reply confirmed it:

"Of course if you can run me pounds in debt it is a small matter to spend shillings on railway fares."

"It is. I prefer to fritter money in that way to remaining sealed up in a cage with a man who acts like a wild beast. I go to Hastings to-morrow."

He bit his lip to retain a retort, and the barter of words

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ended. Taking his hat he left the house, and when he had gone she took her book upstairs and read in the bedroom.

She had the flavour of a sort of depraved pleasure in the perverse obstinacy with which she kept the alabaster face in his presence. She did not experience any real difficulty in maintaining a Sphinx-like coldness: the custom of silence imposed during his long hours of writing proved Spartan training, and books helped in the passage of time. Her intention was to have as few words as possible with him, and, having secured her situation, to tell him so without flourish of words. Thus was her pride to be avenged, and thus was his brutality to be punished.

A trial of Eastbourne and Hastings for employment gave her no satisfaction, and, returning home, still firm in her resolve, she had a thought of Brighton. "Brighton" had occurred before, but she had had a sudden wave of shame that George Graham might discover that she had returned to her old occupation, and the fear that she would have, therefore, to give him an excuse. But Brighton meant life—Brighton *was* life! That was the heavier weight in the balance, and she decided to try fortune there at the week-end.

For an easement of the strain of feeding thrice daily in the presence of a Galatea frozen to marble Euean came to his meals at the time she concluded hers, and munched in a room voluntarily empty of her presence. He knew the obstinacy of her nature, and therefore expected no advance towards peace on her part; but his soreness at her extravagance would not allow him to forgive her yet, and he determined to punish her by outpacing her own obstinacy. Relying, therefore, upon the exhaustion of her small supply of money, he was resolved that her absences from home should not influence him towards the pretence of a warmer attitude towards her. Thus, beyond an occasional monosyllabic exchange, impossible to avoid in the nature of their daily contact, their cottage was as dead to human voices as a Parsee Tower of Silence.

Charity went to Brighton determined to offer her services at any draper's establishment but that of Mason Brothers, Sons, and Company. Dread of exhibiting a fall of her pride to any of her old connections there forbade this. She had to grip her courage to take her into the first shop chosen, and she felt her hold upon it loosen as she left it an unsuccessful applicant.

Further equally fruitless trials ended in her finding herself

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prey to a supreme misery. Her short experience was an obstacle that could not be cleared away in one instance where, without that barrier, she might have received an appointment. At another shop the manager's glimpse of her wedding ring damned her chance, and she had to retreat with her face afire. Outside again she deprived her finger of it, and felt herself able to well tears through sheer disappointment. Disappointment was superlative, but determination to succeed somewhere was superlative also.

Her eyes were drawn to the stream of road traffic, but her mind was busy with the thought of abandoning all further trial of Brighton. Suddenly she found her attention fixed on the occupant of a passing brougham, and was aware that she saw a face that was known to her, but that her present misery did not allow her instantly to recognise. It was merely a momentary forgetfulness, for her brain, summoned to instant aid, was quick to help her, and she knew that she saw George Graham. Her instinct was to flee before he turned his head, and her rush for the doorway of a confectioner's shop was precipitate.

She had to make a purchase for an excuse for her entry, and, being served, she turned to glance at the street for reassurance that the vehicle had passed. She saw him at the shop door, his hat lifted in the respectful salute, and she had to advance to take the greeting:

"Good-morning, Mrs Strachan. This is a pleasure! So the Brighton shops have attractions above those of Hastings? I, also, have been shopping. Is your husband with you? I thought that perhaps I might be fortunate enough to secure your presence at luncheon. My carriage is waiting."

"Thank you very much, Mr Graham. I am afraid that I shall have to decline. Euean did not come with me, and of course I could hardly accept your hospitality in his absence. You quite understand."

There was neither confusion nor smile in her greeting, and, vaguely, he wondered at the absence of her usual liveliness of manner.

"Then perhaps you'll allow me to walk a little way with you. I have finished my work, and I can send the brougham home."

She hesitated to give permission, but while she considered he stepped to the kerb and dismissed the carriage; and, seeing this, she felt that it would be difficult to refuse him.

He turned to rejoin her, and inquired if her day's business

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at Brighton was completed. Despairing of fortune in her hunt for employment that day she declared that she had nothing further to keep her until the time of her train's departure, and he proposed that they should pace the Parade, walking Hovewards.

Her mood was as grey as the autumn afternoon itself, and no effort of hers could disperse the heavy cloud of her humour. He had been quick to notice the absence of sunshine in her manner, and presently he asked if she was not well.

"I don't feel very well, as a matter of fact. Dull days sometimes depress me."

He gave his next remark with a smile:

"You are a kind of human barometer. To-day one might think you the most miserable of spinsters, instead of the happiest of wives."

His lightly spoken sentences were a touch on a bare wound. He was not prepared for their effect. Her breathing had quickened almost while he spoke, and now she suddenly burst into tears.

The outbreak equally surprised herself, and the shame of it caused her to turn her head from him. But she could not disguise the grief and disappointment which were shaking her bosom, and, with a sympathetic impulse to clasp her he found himself in the difficult necessity of saying something to comfort her:

"My dear Mrs Strachan, what have I said! I am afraid that somehow I have unwittingly hurt your feelings. Let me take you to a seat; or, stay, I'll fetch a cab."

"No, no!—not for anything! This is silly of me! I'm not myself; I'm not quite happy to-day—depressed. Whatever must you think of me! I haven't wept for years—at least not for many days."

The outpour showed signs of diminishing. Misery given vent to is half consoled; she was quieter.

"I am sure there is something wrong. Your husband is not in Brighton—perhaps he is not well?—but then you would not have left him. I am afraid that my questions are rude."

"No; on the other hand, I think that you are entitled to an explanation. In fact I have had a tiff with Euean. That is why I came here to-day."

He gave a pondering minute to her excuse, and his reply was in a tone of sympathy, intended for a soothing effect:

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I don't suppose that it can

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be really serious. The outing will have done you good, and you'll go home and be friends. I believe that all married people quarrel; it is the natural way of making marital affection sweet, and saves the married condition from being a dull one. If your husband has earned your displeasure, your woman's nature has in it the power to forgive as well as the power to punish him, and I am sure he is well punished by your absence from him to-day."

She had an immediate picture of how much she would have to forgive, and how great and unforgivable had been the injury to her pride. Her protest was impassioned:

"Forgiveness is impossible! Do you know that we have not spoken to each other for more than a week. Euean and I are nothing more than intimate strangers; I feel that I can never speak to him again! He has the temper of a madman, and an equal violence! Do you think that I can forgive a man who has used his physical strength upon me?"

His tone told of his astonishment:

"You don't mean to say that he has struck you!"

"No, not that, it is worse—he has insulted me! I could take a blow better than an insult.—My pride! Euean can't understand how a woman's pride can be hurt—I doubt if any man can."

"I think you'll overlook that in time. Unkind words leave no marks, and time softens their effects."

By his view of the matter she was brought to give an impetuous explanation of what had occurred between Euean and herself, in order that she might satisfy him with a sufficient excuse for her resentment. The flow of words gave her the satisfaction of relief, but she was dimly aware of an absence of loyalty to Euean in telling so much. Graham had indignation for the author of her unhappiness:

"If I were a woman married to a man who made me unhappy I would leave him until he came to his senses. Some men, I know, are born Turks; but an educated man!—there is no excuse."

Inconsistently she was slightly apologetic on Euean's behalf:

"Of course he has had much to put up with, and we are very poor. Poverty makes for irritation. Perhaps, I should not have bought the gown under the circumstances."

"Perhaps not, but gentlemen can show proper displeasure in other ways than by violence. He must have been possessed with the devilry of a wife-beater."

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"If he does anything like that again I shall leave him."

"You would be justified; but of course if he wished he could compel you to return to him, unless you could prove cruelty sufficiently severe to satisfy the law."

"When he has been violent I have had the feeling that I ought not to live with him."

"Yes, I can quite understand that; but you could not leave him altogether: you are his wife."

"No, I am not."

The bitterness in her heart against Euean allowed her no time for the weighing of words. The truth was out before she knew.

He was struck mute, and for a measure of moments astonishment would not allow him to speak. A sudden flood of colour had darkened his face, and he looked at her with eyes of sharp interrogation and his surprise so plainly spelt that, in the moment of excusing herself, she hardly knew what she said. Latent tears were in her voice as she spoke:

"I see that I have shocked you, Mr Graham. I had no right to tell you, as Euean is my partner in the secret. I can't tell you how unhappy I am! Nobody knows of this but you—I must tell someone. We had every excuse—indeed, we had! You would be the first to acknowledge that if you only knew everything. The conventions don't trouble me. The world, not having had my experience, would condemn, but I could face it. It is only Euean's unkindness that makes me unhappy."

Her voice quavered to a further melting, of which her present unconsidered disloyalty to Euean was a participant cause. She was thoroughly unhappy, and Graham, smothering the passion to embrace her, felt the necessity of finding words for a mask to cover the starting tears:

"I don't think that you have need to reproach yourself for telling me: the circumstances warranted that. You'll find me a safe confidant, and I can now give you correct advice which would not have been possible had you kept your secret. You have a plain duty to yourself. You must tell Euean that you cannot—that you will not tolerate his ferocity. You must remind him that, under the circumstances, no one can compel you to live with him; and that if he makes you the subject of further violence you will leave him for ever."

"I have told him that much; and I should have left him now if I could have been independent. I have been looking

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for employment—that is why I came to Brighton to-day—but I have no luck.”

“ You have friends.”

“ I could never go to them. Besides they think I am married to Euean. It would almost kill my mother if she knew the facts.”

“ Then come to me when next you have cause to need the help of a friend.”

The impulse with which he spoke was tinged with a stirring of the old regard for her. His admiration for this woman, of an hour before, was a thing different from the admiration of the present moment. Regard for Charity as another man's wife was regard guarded; now knowledge of what her position really was allowed a licence to regard. A beautiful woman in distress called for a paladin for her deliverance, and in the delivery of beauty to which no man had legal claim was romance to give zest to the champion.

They continued to pace, and she took a glance at him to see how he was digesting her news. He caught her look, and thought it an invitation to words:

“ And I have been thinking all the time that you were perfectly happy!”

“ I have been happy, but I feel that I shall never be so again. Euean has been as good to me as most men are to their wives, but I think that he does not quite understand women: he lives an almost entirely mental life, and to me the mental life is often narrow—almost selfish. I am ambitious—you know that. I don't think that nature intended me to be the wife of a poor man.”

He was thinking, and did not reply. He felt that she was conscious of having made a great mistake in the position she had assumed with Euean Strachan. More than that he was aware of a rapid change in himself, due to her revelation. Passion had awakened with a spring, and he knew that his heart exulted.

Yet he prided himself upon the possession of the gentlemanly instinct, and by his code he could not agree that it would be a gentlemanly thing to regard her in the light of a possible possession. By that right she was Euean Strachan's, and her duty lay to him as the man who had afforded her protection and shelter. It was an amazing thing that she had consented to live with any man as his pretended wife. Singular views on the sexual relationship were hers, he knew, but he knew also that, failing the possibility of the legal

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marriage knot, she must have had desperate reasons for accepting so compromising a position. He wondered if he might draw these from her when, divining something of what his mind reviewed, she offered him the story.

She told it in plain sentences that were evidence of her sufficient and firm belief in her own justification. Listening quietly to her tale his regard for her pressed him mentally to agree in her excuses, and he was enabled to think that the position of the maiden yearning for marriage had good and sufficient excuse in defying conventions and opposing social laws in order to obey the laws of nature ; and this conclusion forced the sign of his approval from him in words that absolved her from condemnation of her action :

" I cannot blame you even if I thought it my privilege. Thousands of women are living in perpetual antagonism with nature. Nature is right and wholesome, and the conventions forbid them to obey her. It is tragic ! A lifelong spinsterhood is to be numbered among the world's great tragedies by those who have to endure it. I see no remedy under existing social conditions ; and the woman who treads in your steps must be prepared to face condemnation. If the world stones her there are still broadminded men and women to take her part."

" The pity is that they have not courage to express their sympathy. No one knows more than I do how the want of sympathy makes one feel criminal when one has only one's convictions on which to rely. That is where the cruelty lies."

He answered with a smile, speaking lightly :

" I am inclined to think with Admiral Sheepshanks that the state of polygamy has points to recommend it."

" You are a Turk ; but I will not say that your friend is not right. As you know, I go far in my views. If religion and society could be adapted to allow a man to take more than one wife at one time I do not say that it would not make for human happiness. There is the alternative of the emigration of women which would do much, but our women lack courage for the uncertainties of the step."

" That, I believe, is true. We'll talk of this again. I don't want to cause you to miss your train ; you may court more trouble at home it you do. Besides, you must have some tea. Will you let me help you out of your difficulty with Euean ? "

Her reply was made mournfully :

" I don't see how you can."

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"I might supply you with the money to pay for your ball-dress."

"Oh no; I could not agree to that! It would never do."

"I might lend it to you."

"You are very good, but that would not do either. I am proud; besides Euean would have to know that the bill had been paid, and there would be more trouble. Please don't press it."

He took her to a tea shop, and was astonished at her avidity for sweet pastry. When, in excuse, she told him that she had only eaten a bun since her breakfast, she found his expression of sympathy almost embarrassing. Preparing to leave the tea shop he remembered his suggestion that she should let him know if she ever met with further trouble. Apparently she was deep in the arrangement of a ribbon of her attire, and he had no reply; but her movement showed him her hand deprived of the wedding ring that he had observed there, and he took it as evidence of her wish to blot out remembrance of Euean.

"Do you promise?"

"I think——"

"I may be able to help you. I have lady friends."

"I don't think I ought."

"You are a free agent. Do I understand that you will allow me to help?"

"Yes—I hope that help may not be necessary."

He read her thought in the tone of her assent, and he strove to drive away the doubt he saw in her mind:

"There would be no harm. I want to be your friend—always. We have been more than friends—have you forgotten?"

The swift flush in her face proved that she had not, and he briefly wondered as to the real cause of it. He saw her glance at her watch, and he accepted it as the signal for a movement towards the railway station.

They stood talking on the platform until the guard's whistle shrieked the signal for the train's start. The woman had her head and arms out of the compartment window. She offered him her hand with a smile, and, taking it in his own, he suddenly raised it to his lips for an old-world salute.

At the action her face was a blush rose. The train was moving.

"Good-bye, Mr Graham."

"Good-bye—good-bye, Charity."

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He was running with the train to keep on a level with her carriage. He spoke on an impulse:

"Come over to-morrow."

A porter warned him, and he had the disappointment of seeing her lips move in reply, and not hearing its purport. She waved her hand, and he watched her until the train was out of view. Then he turned away with the feeling that he had bidden an eternal farewell to his dearest friend.

His brain was hot with a torrent of thought. He strode to the street, aware of his shallow-buried passion risen to startle him. He gave it chase, and thought to see it disappear, but the evident knowledge of its presence made it a thing difficult to part from. He loved the girl, and had asked her to meet him on the morrow; and now he excused himself by casting blame on circumstance.

In mental wrestling he had to walk rapidly to come to an understanding with himself. He had sighed on account of her loss, and now found himself sighing for her gain. Her pitiable position struck at his heart, and, pitying her, inordinate desire of her filled it. He knew that the honourable part was to drive desire out, but desire excused itself by the suggestion that Euean Strachan had forfeited her by undervaluation. If he could help her to happiness surely he had claim upon her. To him her beauty was a glorious thing; more, she had a mind; more yet, she had breeding and knowledge, and these were good things in the eyes of a public man wanting a wife as helpmeet in his career. Her ambitions would be mate for his; he could gain strength to climb the world's heights from the possession of her. He could grant her needs, if she but granted his; and if the man who had taken her from him could not appreciate her value, she, not legally bound, was fair game for stalking, and the loser of the prize could have no justifiable complaint for his loss.

XXIX

IN the train, peacefully purring, Charity fell back on reflection that led to a comparison of the two men who had played parts in her life. Turning thought to Euean she had irritation in a view of his contempt for many of the little things that make for personal refinement: his disregard for the mode in dress and fineness of manners, and his eternal preference for mental above material pleasures. All that he lacked in these respects George Graham possessed; and she felt herself degraded by the thought of it.

She found him still surrounded by the wooden atmosphere of obstinate exclusiveness which, of late days, had been mutually cultivated, and she took unobserved glances to compare him in the light of the adumbrative halo with which, unconsciously, she had surrounded George Graham. In the discovery that he was writing in an old and ragged coat, was without a linen collar, and that the protruding wristbands of a coarse flannel shirt were visible, she had a slight feeling of nausea. The woman of despair became the woman of revolt once more, and disgust goaded her from the room with impatience.

Graham's invitation for the morrow was a struggle to ignore. She dressed herself to fulfil it, but her mind, not thoroughly decided, had the thought that she would not be able to satisfy her conscience with sufficient excuse for so hazardous an action, and one that savoured of disloyalty to Euean. For the moment she discarded the idea, and, sitting down, wrote her apology. Her road to the post office lay in the way of the railway, and she could not bring herself to lose control of the letter until she had seen the train that might have taken her to Brighton steam from the station.

Sunday intervened, and her mind, now unsettled for books, had nothing for its entertainment but reflection. She felt the desire of conversation, but obstinacy and pride held her from making an advance to Euean. In the afternoon, for some satisfaction of her desire, she walked to the cottage where Eunice French was living, and whittled away an hour and a half in trivialities of talk.

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Evening was duller still, and in revolt from dullness she shook her fetters in the determination that to-morrow should see the breaking of the spell, when she would seek Graham for the sake of making sure that life still had its distractions. Suggestion was backed by strength of purpose, which the morning's sun had no influence to weaken, and until she found herself seated in the early afternoon train she gave no listening ear to fears for the outcome of her adventure.

She would have to make plausible excuse to George for the satisfaction of the proprieties. Her frame trembled slightly under stress of the control of her excitement, and her mind framed incongruous speeches for excuse. She shut her eyes for composure, and sought vindications for her action. There was no harm, she was a free woman—a mean elf of thought gave her that reminder—and she knew how to take care of herself. Thus in internal argument she became more passive. Her only admission was that in seeking George Graham she sought escape from dullness, and for that reason, and in Euean's perversity, she had good enough excuse.

At Brighton she paced the Parades hoping to meet George Graham, her courage oozing as the steady run of sand in an hour-glass. Her mind fluxed with emotion, and she was swayed helpless, a cockle-boat upon a flood. She found herself victim to a new experience: until now she and irresolution had never met, and the reason for such an acquaintance she groped to see, but at the glimmer of it drew back, determined not to believe. A leaning towards her duty to Euean was weakly suggested; but the thought of him bred quick thought of her wrongs, and anger flared up white, giving her the determination of which reflection was depriving her.

As the sum of her deliberations she was driven to face the fact that Euean had not realised her ideal. She had grown weary in waiting for his success, but she assured herself that she had the patience still to wait for it if he would only make her life tolerable. Since his recent actions and attitude to her had declined her this, she was fronted with the suggestion of a cooling of his love for her. Her reasons were cogent; and when she considered her present feeling of repulsion for him she was forced to fancy that her own love was in process of evaporation.

The repossession of her normal self was a goad to Graham's gate. She was conscious that her face had gone pale, and that her limbs trembled, and while the clang of the front-door bell died away in echo she rubbed her cheeks with her

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gloves to restore their colour. When the butler drew open the door she was stood up stately, expectancy on tiptoe for the meeting.

Graham was within, and her summons brought him to her with eager steps and a grave face. By her coming he expected news of further domestic difference, and she found momentary difficulty in an initial explanation. Hearing it his heart leaped in the hope that there was an unrevealed reason for the visit, one that his heart fluttered to anticipate. The innocent consciousness of her natural blush of confusion was an excuse for the tone of ardour in his words :

"It was right of you to come, Charity. You are not to be blamed for anything you may choose to do under the circumstances."

"I am glad that you do not blame me, Mr Graham. I have had doubts as to the justification of my action, but this eternal silence between Euean and myself seems to be killing my soul. I must have some intelligent being to talk with, or I feel that I shall go mad. Yesterday I could have shrieked for relief. I come to you as to a great friend. I can't tell you how unhappy I am. Nobody knows of it but you—and I must tell someone."

He found himself entangled in a net of thought without the gladiator's power to cut the meshes. His only clear vision was of her seated before him, pathetic, beautiful, more desirable than ever. To look at her thus was to snap the web and take what was within his grasp. Love has no restrictions, it is all strength.

"My poor girl, how you must suffer ! To think that things might have been so different had I accepted the opportunity I had of marrying you drives me to madness. I loved you in those days, but I did not know that I loved you so much as I love you now."

She started back, white with a fright the cause of which she had not thought possible. Her agitation hardly allowed the free escape of her words :

"Mr Graham !—Oh, you must not talk like this !"

"Indeed, I must ! My love is strong, and I cannot help it. Let us begin to love each other again. You are free—by all the laws you are free. Let me make you happy—I can, I will make you happy."

She was near to tears :

"Oh, what are you saying ! We must not talk like this ! I wanted you for my friend. What am I doing ? I ought

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not to be here. Let me go, and forget me. I was not meant for happiness ! It is best that you should forget me. You will meet some other woman to love."

Her eyes rained in pity for herself and he felt that he could weep with her. His words ran on an excursion :

"I could never love any woman as I love you, Charity. If once I was fool enough to give you up for the sake of my career I ask you now to share it with me : I ask you to marry me. Be sensible, dear girl."

"It is impossible !—Can't you see how impossible it is ? I regard Euean as my husband, whatever his faults. Besides, my people are to be considered : you forget that they look upon me as Euean's lawful wife. Be my friend, Mr Graham ; and please don't mention this again. I will go away now ; it is best."

Her face was index to the misery of her heart. His own heart was full of emotion, but he pressed it down.

"Forgive me if I have done wrong. You must allow love to be my excuse ; I love you, and I shall always love you. There will be no danger in coming to me whenever you are in trouble. I shall not speak of this again. You cannot go home yet—there is no train. Besides you must have tea. Let us pass the rest of the time together as friends, and please forget what has occurred."

He looked so despondent that she felt that he was a subject worthy of her pity, and she gave her words a warmth that almost amounted to ardour :

"Thank you for saying that. I can trust you as my friend. You will see that, if I have need to come to you for advice. I may need it yet—one never knows."

Here was a thing to think upon on her homeward journey. As she brought herself to consider all that the acceptance of Graham's offer would have meant to her, she could not be unconscious of the fact that to take him as her husband would be an almost immediate realisation of all her aspirations. She looked upon him as one of England's future Great Ones : a potential hero on the road to his achievements, and to be the companion of such a man would be to grasp the world of power and pleasure.

Consideration of this led to a recomparison of him with Euean : one was of wood, the other was of flesh. Regarding Graham in perspective added charms to her mental picture of him as a manly gentleman. The gentleness of his apology, when she had made it clear that his proposal of marriage was

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an impossible thing for her to consider, recurred, and was another proof of his quality. Summing up his personal attractions her heart gave a little leap, and she timidly asked it if she might not love him. The question had a sigh for answer.

The longing for the permanent attainment of the luxurious life, that she had tasted only, led to a bewailing of her lot, and an exasperation against Euean for his non-achievements, and his want of ambition for wealth. She felt that she had fair cause to seek revenge for the injustices to which he had subjected her; and her regard of him was more bitter, her consideration of George Graham was more kind.

And she was bound to Euean for life by the chains of honour. She saw herself in the future sitting in that awful tomb of a dreadful mediocrity, and she shuddered at the view of her perpetual imprisonment.

Arrived at the cottage she found Euean in a fume, whereof she had the cause on a glance at the table, where lay an open letter and account from her importuning dressmakers. Her egoism stood up haughty as she saw through Euean's trick of leaving the letter where it would take her observation on her return. It was not the act of a gentleman—not a thing that George Graham would have done—and she felt able to hurl black names at him for a cad. But indignation dropped to contempt, and, in preparing her meal, she removed the papers to the mantelshelf, as if she had not, and did not desire, the curiosity to make their acquaintance.

She went early to bed to consider her misery. Thinking of what was, and of what might have been, she threw blame on the injustice of the world and execrated it for what it denied her. It seemed to be her fate to dwell with longings for a life of stir and violent pleasures. Thinking thus she actually wept for herself, and it was long before her mental disturbance allowed her the comfort of sleep.

Rising late she found Euean out for his morning walk, and a letter for herself lying on the breakfast tablecloth. It was from her mother, whose principal news was of the success of her young brother Geoff in winning a school scholarship. His desire was to follow the profession of an engineer in the Royal Navy, and the mother said that it hurt her to know that she would have to refuse the ambition on account of the necessity of money to grant it. The summer had been a hard one, and John Woodhams had been compelled to give bills for his seed, which he had failed to meet, and a seizure

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of goods was imminent unless the money were forthcoming. The mother hoped that Euean was in the way to fortune, and that her girl continued to be happy with him. She sighed for a meeting.

Charity's late excursions from home had bred a distaste for the duties of the household. Work of the kind had never really interested her; now it was positively hateful. When there was sunshine she took a book and pretended to read in the garden; but thinking was her occupation and George Graham nearly always held her mind.

It struck her that, had she been his wife, the appeal from her old home would not have been in vain. In that position she would have been able to help her parents in their necessity, and have experienced a pleasure in so doing. Pleasures of all kinds were denied her now; and in the desire to help her own relatives she had hard thoughts of the miserliness of fate.

Never had her instincts of luxury and her craving for money been so pronounced as now; never had her disgust for her condition been so keen. So clear had been her visions of an almost immediate Atlantis at the time of casting in her lot with Euean that, in her present condition of waking to realities, she had the feeling of a sick despair. She saw that in allowing Euean to lay the foundation of her ambitions she had been deceived into the belief that it was possible to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, and the realisation of this fraud was a thing that hurt her to contemplate.

What had she won by declining to wait for George Graham? Privation, insults, commonplaces: in a word, sordidness; and all that she had denied herself she might have had. The memory of Graham returned with irresistible fascinations, like a renascent glamour, and she allowed herself to drift with his image along a sunlit sea, which, in view, provided enthusiasm for her soul. Euean was more removed from her now than ever he had been before: he was intolerable, impossible, as an ideal he did not exist.

Thus regard for George Graham fought for a recognition which grew daily. Thoughts of the life desired repelled thoughts of the life possessed; her appreciation of George and her repulsion of Euean increased until they repelled each other as the poles.

Intense mental dissatisfaction had physical effects: she grew slightly thinner, pale, and her large eyes became sad and staring. Calmness was now her habitual manner;

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coldness was consciously adopted on occasion ; her reserve was hardly ever surprised.

Euean's imperturbability at times drove her to exasperation, and led her to fancy that she recognised a love for George Graham creeping into her heart. She blotted it out, and told herself that she had made a sacrifice in so doing.

Irritation, that had been her frequent companion before the days that gave her Euean's love, was asserted once more. Small things annoyed her. Longing and melancholy were equal partners in the possession of her mind, and she began to think of another visit to Graham for the pleasure of a brief companionship.

She thought that she believed in portents when a letter from Mrs Quarmby-Smith informed her that she and her niece were spending a few days at Brighton, and desired her own and Euean's company for the week-end. Her heart was off at an immediate gallop, and her mind had a minute's conjecture of the delights of the big hotel from which Mrs Quarmby-Smith had dated her letter, while for hours she dwelt on surmises of her chances of meeting George Graham.

She had the thought, and, unconsciously, the hope, that the present frigidity existing between Euean and herself might be thawed in the co-enjoyment of a few days in the manner suggested by the letter. She took it to him :

" I have received this from Mrs Quarmby-Smith. I have brought it to you to read as it concerns you as well as myself."

He read the letter while she pretended indifference in a show of an application to needlework. He spoke on the conclusion of his reading :

" I shall not go. You, of course, are at liberty to please yourself."

" Mrs Quarmby-Smith will think it strange."

" You must make the best excuse for me you can. Say I am busy ; it won't be a lie. I have no money to spare for railway fares. What little I possess is required for more important things."

The last sentence fired her, and her prompt and impatient action was an acceptance of the invitation. She spent half-a-day in dangling with her wardrobe ; and when the time for her departure arrived she went to acquaint Euean of the fact. He looked at her with an unsteady eye :

" Of course you'll tell Mrs Quarmby-Smith that I've treated you like a monster."

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His suspicion raised her contempt, and he had her reply at once :

" If I did I should only tell her the truth."

" I only desire the truth—all the truth."

She turned her shoulder as a sign that she was not inclined to controversy, wished him good-bye with averted face, and left the house.

With loud old-fashioned welcome Mrs Quarmby-Smith was at Brighton railway station to meet her. For Charity the taste of pleasure was immediately renewed in the drive to the hotel. In gossip Mrs Quarmby-Smith spoke of a meeting with Mr Graham on the preceding day, and in airy confidence informed her young friend that she had ambition for a match between him and her niece, Mary Ann Mallington. At once Charity's face was hot, and she turned to the street to hide it.

" It would be a most desirable match, love. Mary Ann will come into a little pile when her mother dies, and though she has not your accomplishments I have no doubt that she would make Mr Graham a capital good wife."

" But do you think that Mr Graham has any affection for her ? "

" I've had no opportunity of judging. Affection may often be won by a little diplomacy, and Mary Ann, though no beauty, has her points. Mr Graham comes to tea with us to-morrow."

The sensation of a rapidly fleeting jealousy, startled within her by the news, was succeeded in Charity by a well-argued consideration that George Graham would prove a Gibraltar to the combined batteries of Mrs Quarmby-Smith and her niece. Lofly too, as the Rock, she thought him, with a pride that would bend its neck only to yoke with a woman of blood and breeding. The man of no birth or ancestry to name, blessed with ambition and a purse, has almost equal mate in the woman who can give dignity to his household and a good strain of blood to his children. Poor Mary Ann Mallington was impotent for both ; and Charity, mentally confessing that she had no love for George herself, marvelled mildly at the satisfaction she obtained in the conclusion that a marriage between Graham and Mrs Quarmby-Smith's niece was an impossible affair. She put the feeling down to anxiety on her part that he should do better for himself.

On Sunday afternoon he came to tea, expressing a fear that he had kept his hostess waiting. He had an excuse in a

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visit he had just paid to Admiral Sheepshanks, martyr to gout and victim to bad temper. His apology was so well-made, and so free from effusion that Charity felt admiration for the manner of it. It was possible for breeding to exist without high birth : George Graham was a proof of that ; and a man who has a nobility unrecognised by the Peerage is still a man of blood.

Talk of Admiral Sheepshanks connected him in Charity's mind with her brother Geoffrey's desire to enter the navy ; and she mentioned this aspiration to Graham, and asked him if it were possible for a gentlemanly lad, having all expected qualifications but money, to attain such an ambition.

" I am afraid it is almost impossible, but I can give you no real information. If you'll allow me, however, I'll question the Admiral. If anything can be done he'll do it for me ; and if it were possible he'd have every healthy British boy in the navy for the sake of the country."

She had a little laugh for the Sea Dog's method of enforcing patriotism, and consented to Graham's offer to obtain the information she wished for, requesting him, in interviewing the Admiral on the subject, to keep back her name.

An equal distribution of the young man's gallantry among the three ladies precluded any individual jealousy. Mary, Ann Mallington's afternoon was passed in a succession of self-conscious blushes whenever Graham spoke to her. Her heated face was uncommonly painful when her aunt made a sudden plunge :

" I'm surprised that you don't get married, Mr Graham ! "

He was astonished at the question and its abruptness, but he did not betray the feeling :

" My political work occupies so much of my time that a wife would have cause to complain of neglect."

" A wife can often influence votes."

" My naval friend takes a wife's place in that matter. Being an old political campaigner he is almost as good. After the General Election I may have time to look for a wife. If I stopped to marry now I really believe that the Admiral would cast me over. Women for wives and mothers only, he says. In politics they'd wreck a whole navy of ships in the persons of political husbands."

" He hates women ? "

" He says so—except as wives and mothers."

Mrs Quarmbury-Smith pretended indignation :

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"If I had my way I'd marry him to twenty wives as punishment."

"That would be no punishment, I assure you. He holds that a man—not a politician—settled in life should support as many wives as he can possibly afford, for the sake of giving sons to his beloved navy."

"'Eathen Turk!"

Charity was constrained to defend the Turks:

"I hear that Turks are gentlemen. I'd rather compare your friend with Moses, who respected women only because they were the means of continuing the race."

Mrs Quarmby-Smith had inclination to use the strongest language she would have permitted to one of her sex:

"'Orrible pagan! I've a mind never to read the Old Testament again! Pray how many wives has your barbarian friend?"

"In spite of his monstrous opinions you will be surprised to learn that he hasn't one to back them: in fact he is a bachelor. 'Every woman is snares and nets,' says the Admiral. If he is compulsorily retired from the political life, he may be snared and netted yet. 'If a man's not fighting for your navy in the House,' he declares, 'he ought to be giving it recruits at home.' If you are shocked at such broadly spoken language please do me the credit of remembering that I use it in quotation."

Graham rose to leave, and, giving Charity his good-bye, he asked her if he should see her in Brighton to receive the information he hoped to obtain from Admiral Sheepshanks. She thought he looked disappointed when she requested him to send it to her by letter. The pressure of his hand was so warm that it remained with her long after he had left; and she imagined that she felt it still when she returned to Pevensy on the following morning, the bearer of cordial messages to Euean from Mrs Quarmby-Smith, which she received without intention of delivering.

XXX

IN the return to monotony the only mild excitement for Charity's anticipation was the expected letter from George Graham that was to give her details which, she hoped, might be for her brother's benefit. She overcame lassitude for two hours in the writing of a long letter to her mother, coloured with her old spirit of cheerfulness, rose-tinted spectacles assumed with the object of infusing the hearts of the parents she loved so well, and for whom her own heart ached though smitten with pain for herself. To think long of their trials in poverty even drove her at times to self-blame that she had not accepted George Graham's offer of marriage, and thus attained a position that would have given her the power of relieving her father and mother of the most pressing trials of their old age. The thought pulled her to pieces in the endeavour to decide whether she had done the best in declining Graham's offer. In accepting it she was sensible of the fact that she would have sacrificed her love, but in pessimistic mood she felt capable of conjugal love no longer, and, if the knowledge of her true relations with Euean would not have been a blow to her mother, she thought that it would have been possible to make the sacrifice.

Euean, starting his morning walk, on the fourth day after Charity's return from Brighton, met the postman, a frequent accident, and asked if there were letters for him. He was handed two, one directed in a writing that was strange to him, and the other addressed "Mrs Strachan," in a forcibly masculine style. He called the postman back to ask him to deliver this letter at the cottage, and, moving to meet the returning man, with a speculative eye still resting on the envelope, he caught the pronounced clue that the postmark gave. The letter was from Brighton, and his immediate inference was that the writer was George Graham.

The wave of blood that rushed to his head at this discovery so flooded his reason that he had to make an effort to give a clear direction to the postman that he wished this letter delivered at the cottage door in the usual manner. Then he continued his march with the blood buzzing in his ears.

Jealousy urged suspicion to prompt plain tales regarding

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Charity's recent frequent absences from home. She had made excuse of their difference to meet Graham clandestinely. In the light that Graham was an old lover with a patent admiration for her, he saw a flame of love still burning for her in that young man's heart. The draught of suspicion was doing its work well. He had the feeling of the murderer who shoots in jealous rage: at that moment he could have killed both the man and the woman.

He was for returning home at once and taxing her with what she was. He had a foretaste of his jealousy's grim pleasure in seeing her cringe when he laid bare the knowledge he had accidentally gained. This beast should give him that satisfaction before he drove her from his door, and cursed her to the streets. The muscles of his body tightened under the vividness of the prescient vision. Reaction was rapid and intense almost to the breaking of his heart. The cruelty of the situation forced tears to his eyes, for he knew that he loved her still.

He was thus conscious that his state was that of the lover wounded deeply in his love. What to do required the wisdom of angels to decide. To him it was the agony of hell; he required the Spartan heart that could tear its own in tearing that of its best-beloved.

He strove for Spartan patience in deciding that his plan must be to wait for positive proofs. When they were his he told himself he would act. How, was not a matter for instant decision.

The letter he had retained was still in his hand, but he had not been able to spare a thought for it. Now his eye caught the crumpled missive, and he opened it with mechanical fingers. It was from a solicitor writing on behalf of the dress-makers, Charity's creditors, and threatening a summons unless the account were paid within a week. He tore the paper to pieces and flung them to the hedge.

In reconsideration he could give attention to nothing but the yellow dog rampaging in his heart like a mad thing. It brought to his mind little incidents that had passed between Charity and George Graham in his presence, and that, hitherto, had been forgotten. He remembered how her face had lit up, and how her eyes had sparkled when they had talked on the day he had taken her to visit Graham at Brighton. He remembered, also, the little smiles and blushes of that day, and in the light of his present discovery those smiles and blushes had a new meaning.

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Realisation of this was a thing to make him gasp for breath. He felt as if a rock had been rolled upon his heart. For a moment it seemed to stop beating; then it hammered so violently as to give him a feeling of actual physical pain.

The suffering was more terrible the more he thought and endeavoured to connect events of the past. Those frequent absences from home! What did they mean? That visit to Mrs Quarmby-Smith! Could he regard that as free from suspicion? George Graham was the type of man to attract any woman who could not pierce the veneer of well-cut clothes and dandified manners. Graham had the "smartness" that he had always associated with those persons who preferred to spend their time and money on their backs to the cultivation of their brains; and she?—she was dazzled by all this, by the man's wealth, as she had always been dazzled by wealth, and she had taken the excuse of the present estrangement as validity for her acts. He read them both as though they were open books.

He thought of his wife and how he had once found her, and he had curses for the whole sex. Now rage with jealousy tugged at the leash and almost choked him, and he felt that only by walking hard could he breathe. He walked furiously until the perspiration streamed from his face, and he was compelled to have mercy on himself and slacken his pace.

The physical effort of that furious spurt had a mental effect. He began to feel easier; he became sufficiently calm to reason with himself. The remembrance of the continual evidence of Charity's love for him pleaded strongly in her favour. During the whole time she had lived with him he had, up to now, no cause to suspect her of unfaithfulness in love. That had not been the case with his own wife. All along his wife's actions had been evidence to a predisposition to this particular kind of evil, and, had he had eyes to see, he would have seen before the shameful event that had roughly torn the scales away. The moral character of the two women was so diametrically opposite that he began to think that this thing that he thought he had discovered could not be, and he so far calmed the dog within that it lay down, half inclined to repose; while he satisfied himself that he had no cause for condemnation until he had stronger proof of Charity's relapse.

He turned to go home, and when near the post-office saw Charity's figure in front of him, walking in the direction of

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the cottage. Had she been to post a letter to Graham ? was the thought that immediately occurred. Jealousy strained again at the restraining leash, and it was some minutes before he could soothe it. The yellow dog was part of his nature, he told himself ; but he would keep it muzzled until he had proofs. He would watch her. It might be a mean action, but he would satisfy himself, and if he found that he had had no good grounds for so doing he would confess his meanness to her, beg her forgiveness, and end the present estrangement.

That night before going to bed Charity told him that she would be away for a few hours on the following afternoon "on a matter of business." She used the phrase to pique him.

At once the kennelled brute sprang up. He thought he saw to the bottom of a sordid thing, and gave her no reply. The night hours were the time for the raging of the animal within ; he did not sleep : he was tossing on burning marle. He was victim to terror and rage, and neither brain nor body had rest. Imagination began to paint pictures of incidents of which, he began to believe, she was guilty. The more he gazed at them the more vivid they became, the more he believed in them. What a beast she was !—what a beast ! His terrible state of tension was succeeded by the thought of revenge, and he began to make plans with that end in view. He would follow her to Brighton, detect her, and face her with his proofs. She would not be able to deny them, and it would only remain for him to punish her. What form that punishment should take was a matter he could not decide, but the devil was in him, and he was prepared to make it terrible and revengeful in full measure.

Then arose a curious feeling of satisfaction as he contemplated the end. The uncertainty of how far she had gone with Graham had been the killing thought ; but now he felt that he would have mental ease when he knew all. The absolute proof of her infidelity would be welcome because killing uncertainty would be done away with. He got up with the first sign of dawn, dressed, breakfasted hastily and went out of doors to think.

In the afternoon he left the house immediately after the midday meal : as if he intended walking. His direction was towards the station, and he entered the bar of a public-house neighbour to the railway and ordered a glass of claret. He took it to a seat near the window, and in a quarter of an hour saw Charity pass down the road to the waiting-room,

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five minutes before the train was due. He allowed her time to get her ticket, then swallowed his claret and followed, remaining outside the station until he had assured himself that she had crossed the bridge to the platform of departure.

He heard the train screaming its arrival, and while it drew up and hid the awaiting passengers on the opposite platform he dashed for his ticket, flew over the bridge as the train began to move, and, in his haste, had only time to secure a place in the guard's van. At Polegate he saw her leave to await the change to the Brighton train, and knowing that she would not enter the platform refreshment-room he took refuge there and freely drank whisky in a humour of unconsidered madness.

The preliminary bustle of passengers and porters on the platform was the signal of the train's approach. He watched to see her enter the train at the extreme end of carriages near the engine, and he plunged into a compartment level with the door of the refreshment-room.

The spirits he had taken were a stimulating food to the animal within. How it roared! It gave him no peace, and he paced the empty compartment as the beast paced his own heart. He found himself actually wishing for the end of the journey that he might have the proofs he sought within his grasp. He had no doubt of her guilt; he sought only the proofs for the satisfaction of confronting her with them, as he had confronted his wife. He recalled vividly that incident of former days, and in so doing he had the desire for destruction—for killing her and her lover, too. The craving for immediate action had never been so insistent as it was now, and the tension was a terrible thing to bear.

He was calmer when the train drew up at the platform at Brighton, and, watching her leave her compartment, he followed her to Graham's house and saw her enter. It was sufficient: the proof of her guilt was irrefragable and satisfactory. He returned to the station and took the next train back.

His anger was fully charged for the storm when she entered the house in the evening. She looked at him, saw the storm under compression, and was immediately pale. For a long moment the silence throbbed. He stood facing her, conscious of the impression he was producing. For a minute, that passed slowly, he stood gloating on this effect. Then he spoke:

"So you have returned, —! "

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The thing he thought she was was on his tongue, and he named her. She imagined it a trick of her hearing, but the blood flared in her face.

"What did you call me?"

"I called you —, as I have called my wife! You are as vile—all you women are vile! You wreck good men! Damn you! Damn your sex!"

She was trembling in all her limbs, a momentary expression of desperate terror and horror on her face. Her lips twitched, and her fingers, gripping the edge of the table at her back, were palsied. As if struggling against paralysis her tongue stumbled among the words she wished to speak:

"My God, Euean, I don't deserve this!"

He was sure that she lied, and the certainty of the knowledge brought him the madman's frenzy. His face was deformed with jealous fury, and a volume of living anger burst from him. He had no mercy, he was the brute; he was in hell:

"You lie! I followed you to Brighton, and saw you enter his house. Lying won't save you after that; I'll make you confess all! Go down on your knees to me, you common trull! Down on your knees and beg my mercy, for by God you need it!"

She had quailed before the storm of his Olympian wrath, but now her blood came to aid her, and she drew herself up, embodiment of Melpomene, her brown eyes very wide, her face very white. Her pride was intrepid to help her, and the contralto tone of her words was a quintessence of the loathing and contempt she had for him:

"I could explain my visit to George Graham in a dozen words, but after what you have said I shall not deign it, beyond saying it was the visit of a lady to a gentleman, and admits of no such vile interpretation as you have put upon it. I tell you this truth, however: George Graham is as much an honourable gentleman as you are a low brute!"

She moved as if to reach the door, but his blood swayed him as he stood, and made him blind to his immediate action. He stepped to her, and for a moment she felt his hot panting breath in her face. Then his fist, made mighty in strength by madness, flashed out and smote her heavily on the bosom. His fury was out, and it sent her spinning. She shrieked, tried to catch a chair, and fell with a thud that struck his ears sickeningly. Immediate realisation of what he had

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done was a Thor blow on his brain. Her shriek was a sword thrust through his head, and his jaw dropped to the gape. To his horror-struck mind she was shrieking still, although she only sobbed on the floor, a curled-up, trembling bundle. For a moment he gazed at her with bovine stupidity, then passed her with wide hasty strides, blindly left the house, and hid himself in the outside darkness.

The woman moaning on the floor, with her hand at her breast, heard the bang of the door that told that she was left alone. It meant nothing to her, gripped in the agony of her trouble. She sat up, wailing, and, half-stunned, staggered to a chair, laid her arms on the table, and cushioned her head thereon, grief escaping from her in deep, terrible sobs. She could not think, she could only sob and moan, and talk to herself inarticulately; and for half-an-hour she moaned and sobbed and pitied herself.

Then she stood up, lighted a candle, and, forgetting to extinguish the lamp, staggered upstairs to her bedroom. She had taken no food since her return from Brighton, but the pain of hunger was subservient to the pain of her heart. She had received a blow from the man to whom she had given her love, but it was not that that hurt her. The name he had given her was the deep and bleeding wound that no repentance could heal. Her hand still at her bosom she placed the lighted candle so unsteadily on the mantelshelf that the flame trembled; and then she took a handkerchief and sat on the bed to weep. She wept so much that the handkerchief became wet with tears and saliva from her mouth, and when she rolled it into a ball and saw that there was blood on it she only wondered mildly why it should be there, and her look at her white, drawn face in the glass was to see if her grief had caused tears of blood to flow from her eyes.

She was physically exhausted before her mind could assert itself with coherence. There was no necessity to reason. The remembrance of her forbearances and Euean's cruelty became monstrous in her eyes, and the liberty which his blow had permitted her was now become absolute necessity. She must escape from him as soon as possible—at once.

She had a fever for prompt action, and immediately set herself to the task of packing her boxes. Whither she should go was not a matter for the present moment's consideration. To take herself away from him was the desire of her madness, and she worked deep into the night, perspiration damping her face, and her few pauses due to the necessity of wiping

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her mouth free of blood, the reason for which she was too dazed to infer.

Darkness was threadbare before she had completed her labour. She lay, clothed, on the bed to beg the solace of sleep, but racing thoughts kept sleep off. The fact had come to be realised that in leaving Euean she must decide where to go, and in seeking for a decision she was on the rack, her body tossing under torture of her mind. The harbour which George Graham's offer to become his wife afforded had suggested itself to her frequently during the time of her packing, but irresolution in confronting it had kept consideration of the point at bay. Now she must decide it, and the decision was one that needed all her courage to make. She held up scales to weigh it against a suggestion of returning to her home, and when she saw that an explanation for leaving Euean must add to the weight of her mother's burden of troubles that suggestion hit the beam, and her resolution was to seek the advice and, probably, the protection of George Graham.

She saw bristling points in a course of this kind, and, in considering them, Janus-like she faced both ways: towards her past, and towards the future. George Graham's offer had been that of honourable marriage, but she had to face the fact that if she married him it would be without wholly given love on her part. For him she had admiration and respect, and, she decided, she had a little love as well. She thought, too, that the heart of which she could offer him only a corner now might, in the course of time, be offered to him in whole. This specious reasoning was due to recent events; and in further pursuit of the track of thought she wondered at the difficulty she had in not being to offer her complete affection to George Graham at once in the light of her remembrance of the infatuation he had once exercised upon her. Casually, she wondered also if, had she married him in those days, he would have retained her love, and she regarded the point as a curious one. Reverting thought, she decided that she must try to love him now as her only chance of present refuge; but in trying she grew timid of the future, and the outward result of a long wrestling was a determined set of her features, a clenching of hands and locking of jaws. Her lips loosed to mutter, "I'll do it. I'll do it. I have the right; he drives me to it!" She had made a plan of action.

She was drowsy, and daylight was broad in her room when she was startled by a noise at the front door followed

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by footsteps within the house. She had to control her beating heart in the fear that it might be Euean, and she tip-toed from her bed to the balustrade, ready to flee back to her cover if her fear were confirmed. Stretching out her neck she saw Eunice French below, come to prepare breakfast. She observed the woman walk into the sitting-room, and heard her exclaim. There was no sign of Euean's presence, and then she remembered that she had not heard him return since he left the house the night before. Alarm on his account was not suggested to her, but she had a dull curiosity to find the reason for Eunice French's ejaculation. She signalled her presence to the woman below, and had her reply :

"Is that you, m'm ? I found the lamp lit, and had a turn when I see'd it."

"I must have forgotten it, Eunice."

"But the master——?"

"He went out."

"But his hat's on the dining-room table, m'm."

"Oh, is it ? Well, perhaps he hasn't gone far. Make me a cup of tea, please ; and then go to the station and tell Thompson to come at once and fetch my box. I'm going away by an early train."

"I hope nothink's happened down home."

"No—that is, my father is not very well. In fact, he is very ill. I can't explain more now ; but be quick, please."

Fear that Euean might return before she left was a goad to move her at the trot. She swallowed her tea, and was at the station half-an-hour before the train. Not until she was seated and felt the train moving could she take deep breaths, and as the station was left behind her face was a sculpture of hard and bitter lines.

XXXI

PANIC swooped down upon her when she came to Graham's house: her heart started and was still, and aware of cowardice she took a ten minutes' walk to coax her courage. Summoning the butler to the door she learnt that Mr Graham was out, and her immediate feeling was that of relief. But remembering that her action, now that she had gone so far, must be no uncertain one, she inquired the time of his return. George Graham's own voice answered her: he had come up the steps as she asked the question. Her heart jumped, and continued to flutter as he invited her indoors. As the servant withdrew courage fled again.

"I have come to Brighton on a little personal matter, Mr Graham, and thought I would call and ask a few more particulars about my brother's entrance into the navy."

"I have just left Admiral Sheepshanks. Shall I go and bring him to you?"

She had prepared no questions, and was immediately alarmed at the suggestion.

"Oh dear no—please! It is quite unnecessary. You can tell me everything I wish to know."

"We'll go to the morning-room. All right at home, I hope?"

He closed the door, and she placed herself on a chair. Turning to look at her he saw that her eyes were red and heavy and that her face was miserably white and nipped. Closer observation revealed the fact that she was trembling. At once he took her hand and felt it quivering like a 'cello string in his own.

"Things are no better. Euean and I still live as strangers."

By a question he sought the reason for her dejection. Her answer was to press her handkerchief to her eyes and burst into tears. For minutes she sobbed convulsively, then raising her head she arranged her hair with a shaking hand. Looking at his troubled face with wet eyes she murmured an apology:

"I am ashamed—I am disgusted with myself!"

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"You have had your woman's relief."

"I have a great contempt for myself. Tears for little girls; they are weakness in a woman. Women should hate!" Her words came as a torrent: "I have loved, and I have to pay a penalty for loving. I am coming to hate men! I can never love again!"

The torrent ceased, but he saw that she was still trembling. He brought her to tell him of her trouble, and she frankly gave him the story of the previous night. An angry devil was planted in his breast, and anger and love burnt alternate fires in his eyes, but love was restrained from speech in the recollection of his promise to her. The recital had served to re-establish her self-possession: she was calmed as a sick child is by a lullaby, and presently she led to the point of her visit:

"You said that I might come to you, Mr Graham. I want a friend—I, who have nobody."

"You have a friend in me. I am shocked by your news. Things must be altered—I must do something for you. I cannot say what at present. I must think."

She drew a deep catching breath as if for courage, and spoke again, seeming to drive the words from herself with an effort:

"I am going to ask you a curious question, and I want you to answer it as if your questioner were a man instead of a woman."

"Yes?"

"Do you think that a woman may be justified in living with a man to whom she is not married?"

He thought that a qualm of conscience troubled her for the position she had assumed with Euean Strachan, and his charity was to calm her mind:

"Yes, when circumstances are all against the ceremony of marriage I think there may be every excuse. One should look at the morality of motives, rather than of deeds, and my theory on the question of sexual relationship is that Nature should be obeyed rather than artificial convention. We are slaves to convention and authority because society's view of morality is bounded by walls; a levelling of them would allow a broader view, and make for human happiness. Convention may be considered when circumstances admit, for the sake of the proprieties about which the world shouts so much; but reasons may arise sufficiently strong to set convention to one side. Society does not always recognise this."

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"Would you have pluck enough to endorse that opinion if circumstances warranted?"

A suffusion of colour to her face, and a panting bosom were clues which he had not time to absorb in the haste of his reply:

"Points in casuistry always have attractions for some people, but I think that love dare anything. I'd stake my life and reputation for the woman I loved."

"The other day you asked me to marry you."

He seized the clues in part:

"Yes, but you asked me not to speak of it again. Have you altered your mind, Charity?"

"I have made up my mind to leave Euean for ever. He drags me down!—he is brutal! What am I to do?"

"You have come to give yourself to me!"

He stood by her side, bending over her and watching the progress of her feelings mirrored in her face. She did not reply, but raised eyes to him that were near to weeping. He spoke again:

"Let me try to make you happy, darling."

"Oh, George, if you could!—I have had so much unhappiness that I feel I shall never be happy again."

He was ardent and panting in the chase, and, suddenly, he seized her in a hot, strong grasp:

"Dearest, I will make you happy!"

Gently she unclasped his arms:

"But I cannot marry you, George."

His jaw dropped in amazement, and he took a step backward from her:

"I don't understand you, Charity!"

"You said that you dare do anything for the woman you loved."

"But—! I'm in a fog! I asked you to marry me, dear girl. I ask you again."

"Oh, George, please do not think that I am not sensible of that. I am only not sure of myself. If you are willing to take me on my own terms I will be good and faithful to you."

"And what stands in the way of our marriage?"

"I am afraid of myself—I am not yet sure of my love for you. If you care to live with me and love comes stronger we will be quietly married and no one will be the wiser. You may become tired of me in a month or two, and if we are not tied I can go away."

Her amazing proposal led to a slight bitterness in his reply:

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"I am afraid that you still love Euean Strachan."

"No, I hate him! I shall never see him again." I shall forget him, and then love for you will come, I know it will. I do love you a little now, George. I shall learn to love you more, but at present I feel so crushed that I seem to have very little human feeling left at all. If I had not some sort of love for you I could not suggest this; but I ought not to marry you until I love you more than I do. In time I shall. You don't know what it costs me to make such a proposal, George. I have so wanted to be married in a respectable orthodox way; and now I can't love as I ought. But if you are kind and good to me, complete love will soon come. I am very miserable."

Her silent weeping was a visual evidence, and, distracted in thought, he tried to soothe her:

"Never mind, dearest. We will talk this over quietly. Perhaps, after all, you love me more than you think."

She shook her head dolefully, and he took her hand and fondled it:

"It is a bitter disappointment to me, dearest, to hear you say that you do not love me sufficiently well to marry me. I think that you are mistaken, or you would not be willing to pass as my wife. Don't you see how unwise such a position would be with me? I am a public man, and my public life would, sooner or later, lead to the discovery of our true relationship. If you wish it we will defer the marriage until your mind is more settled, but of course that would mean that you would have to go home to your people until our wedding day. I speak like this because I love you so much—it is for your own sake as much as for mine."

That her proposal was a selfish one did not occur to her; and when he spoke thus she had the thought that he was considering himself rather than her, as he had done before, and her sense of utter forlornness was the more acute. She conveyed it in a bitterness of words:

"I cannot go home to my people, George—you must see yourself how impossible that is; and I could not add to mother's troubles. If we were to live together I should have as much to risk as you. Could not the engagement be announced? If we went away people would think that we had gone to be married. My father's illness would be sufficient excuse for no public demonstration. If you think I am asking too much of you I will go away and earn my own living, but—I thought you loved me."

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She wept afresh, and he choked her in his grasp for comfort. He was still conscious of a certain accepted form of rectitude, but his own wishes and waverings began to labour in the birth of a totally different standard to which to set a pattern. Pity and love—humanity were pleading for her, and for his own inclinations. She had been cruelly used, was unhappy, wretched, and it lay within his power to repair all this ; he could give her sympathy and understanding. A simulacrum of his former sense of rectitude was thus rapidly suggested, considered and established even as he replied :

"I do love you ! I have the whole of heaven when you are in my arms. If we once live together we can never afterwards live apart : that would be ruin for both. You must be strong and certain to face the position with me. A public man lives in a continual flood of sunlight ; a suspicion might mean ruin. You may think I speak from egoism, but I am thinking of my honour—of our honour and our future, and it is my duty to point this out to you."

"And I am thinking of our happiness, which is more than honour. I am willing to stake all for that. I'll live with you till love comes, as it is bound to do—I only want happiness to give love. A woman in despair usually calculates nothing and risks everything, but I have calculated all. I have offered myself, George ; it is for you to take or refuse me. If you refuse me I shall have no blame for you. It must be with your heart to decide ; compassion must not count."

He spoke half-musingly :

"If I were only sure.—There are times in life when one may shut one's eyes to imaginable eventualities and go blindly forward." Then louder : "But you have overlooked one thing, dearest. If we had children it would be impossible for you to leave me if the love you say you are waiting for never came."

"I shall never have children, George."

She spoke sadly, and he saw that the stated impossibility was not due to her own wish. He looked into her eyes, and saw the sadness of her tone repeated there. Something in her words gave him suspicion, and he was seeking to frame it in a sentence when she spoke again :

"Some men's love to the women they have chosen is bound by their children. It could never be so with us, George. When I am sure of your continual love without the children I can never have I will marry you, gladly. I want my faith in men restored—it has been damaged. I have had no

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children—Euean is a disappointed man. I have disappointed him, and there is cause for his disappointment. If only I could have been a mother he and I might have been happy now. I think you understand all."

Her confession came to him as a small shock, but his necessity spoke in his desire of her. The impulse of his manhood was to her womanhood, and he knew that it would be impossible for him to give her up. It was his old love who was here, and the memory of the past between them quickened his passion. He feared to listen to the voice of reason—feared lest by listening he should lose her, so his desire rose to master reason for the sake of the prize he could not bring himself to lose. His heart beat violently. The grace of her figure, and the wild pathos of her face in trouble urged him to comfort and take her on any terms to possess her for ever. She was not one to be rejected again for the sake of the world's opinion; and he found himself flung at her feet. Thus was he faced with a temptation that should have had the benefit of his mature consideration, but the necessity for prompt action, and his love for the woman before him sped him to the point of a decision. Conscience urged the part of the saint, but desire urged the sinner's; and the longing for the sinner's prize prevailed. He had conquered the desire to possess her in his attainment of the desired; and his determination was manifested in a passionate kiss upon her unresponsive lips:

"Love is not lust, and I love you."

She answered nothing, and he went on:

"You must stop at a hotel to-night, darling. To-morrow we will go into details. We can discuss everything in a quiet walk. Have you money?"

She told him that she had sufficient for a lodging at an unpretentious hotel.

"Very well; it is better that you should keep from the fashionable ones. I think that you should write to Euean and tell him what you have decided to do."

"I don't feel that I can. What could I say?"

"We will both write; it is the honourable course. You must leave Brighton to-morrow, for the present. You can go home and see your father for a few days. If you write to Euean now I may be able to give you help. An address to your letter will not be necessary. Say that you are staying at a hotel for to-night, and that to-morrow you will leave Brighton."

Each wrote a letter; and then Charity engaged a cab and

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took her box from the station cloak-room to the small hotel that George had chosen for her.

His proposals were ready for her on the morrow. She was to go to Halnaker to see her parents, and then he would find a lodging for her in London while he prepared his friends for his putative marriage. He foresaw difficulties in the way of this that he would not mention to her, but he had the idea of offering her father's critical illness as the excuse for a private ceremony away from Brighton. He loathed the lie, but loved the woman. From London they were to go to Paris, where they would spend a month, and they would return together, husband and wife to the world. He expected the distractions of Paris to do much in re-establishing her old gaiety of disposition ; but before he made the suggestion he asked her once more if she would not relieve him of the necessity of duplicity, and when she wept he called himself fool for treading on her feelings.

XXXII

DARKNESS had never hid greater human misery than that of Euean Strachan when he left Charity moaning on the floor by his own act of violence, and madly strode into the night. Would that darkness could have hid him from himself! The steam of fury spent, he walked for hours. It was raining, but he felt it not. His mind was chaotic; he thought of nothing, he recalled nothing but the woman's scream, and he strode on as if to leave it behind. Hounded on by the spectre in his brain he walked for hours, with no knowledge of the direction of his steps. He walked until his reason returned with physical exhaustion. Then he remembered the blow, the awful suddenness of it; he remembered the scream, and a chill ran down his back.

Then remorse descended upon him like a sharp avenging sword. The vileness of his act was exhibited to him hideously magnified. Insensibly putting aside the reason for his recent jealousy, he viewed Charity in the light of her character as his daily friend and companion. Then he saw his jealousy as a contemptible weakness of character, and his own part in her life as a miserable, sordid thing. Under scrutiny of the magnifying-glass of conscience he came to see how much he had been to blame, how unworthy he had been, and how he had given her all excuse for deserting him with her love.

He returned to the cottage at nine o'clock, wet, mud-stained, haggard and drawn in features. Eunice French, busy about the house, exclaimed at his appearance, and he promptly asked for her mistress. She told him that she had gone to her father, and suspecting that she had received a letter from home he asked for any message that might have been left for him. There was none. Sick and conscious that he deserved this neglect on her part, he seated himself at the table and endeavoured to work. It was useless: the well of creative thought would yield nothing, and at midday he ascended to the bedroom and blankly surveyed the interior.

His wandering eye rested upon a written sheet of note-paper lying on the dressing-table, and, with a quick hope that

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she had taken this manner of communication, he stepped forward and took it up. The writing was not hers ; he saw at once that it was a note from George Graham addressed to her and dated two days back :

" I have obtained information in detail in reference to your brother's wish to enter the navy. There is too much to write, and my time presses. Can you come and see me ? If so I shall be pleased to go into the matter fully. I shall be found at home on Friday afternoon. Send a card if you are able to come."

The revelation came as a thunder stroke ; he sank on to the bed, his jaw dropped. She was innocent, and he was a brute beast ! The blood flew to his face, and he could have cried out his own sin against her.

He must make reparation—immediately, without a minute's delay. He ran downstairs for his hat, with the intention of going to the station and following her at once. He arrived to find that there was no train that would take him to Brighton that day. He returned home to pass a time of remorse in waiting for the morrow.

The morning's post brought him two letters, one bearing his name in Charity's handwriting. He leaped on it as a starving dog pounces on a bone, a vulpine look in his eyes. His heart swerved as he held it ; the blood hammered in his head, then, slowly chilled, sank to his heart. Instinctively his shoulders hunched as though expecting a blow, and he was aware of a vague terror in his heart. He drew a catching breath, and tore the envelope open all at once, dreading the meaning he sought :

Brighton.

" DEAR EUEAN,—I have left you for ever. I will not enter into reasons : there may have been faults on both sides ; but by your own act you have freed me from bondage. You allowed me no opportunity to explain, and I now give myself justice when I tell you that you had no real reason for blotting my name. That is the thing I can never overlook or forgive ! I am now absolutely convinced that we could never be happy together under any circumstances. It is therefore best that you should know that I have quite ceased to love you. I shall be leaving England in a few days for an indefinite time, and you will hear no more of me. My part is to start a new life ; yours is to forget that you ever met me.—C."

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Et tu Brute ! His best beloved had given him the Brutus blow. He had borne, and he could still bear, the strikings of poverty, of unprofitable striving to gain a recognition in the world ; he had even borne his wife's unfaithfulness. But this !—Oh, God !

As his knees gradually gave way under the shock he sat down slowly to think of her, holding the letter in listless fingers. He was alone, and remorse for his cruelty enveloped him in thicker folds. The knowledge that she was innocent, and could have excused her excursions was not the least pain he had to bear. His mind was swift to acquire the accusing consequences of his act to himself, and he summed them up in one word—despair. He could review events impartially now, and in reviewing them he was aware that he had cast away a jewel, and although its possession had cost him much he would have had it now a thousand times if he could. His reflections bore excuses and impatience, and curses for his own blindness. He was bordering on grief, and undergoing a bitter repentance. In a moment the border was passed : he laid his arms on the table, his face to his hands and gave way to terrible, tearless sobbing. Pulsations of keenest misery shook his frame, and tore the heart within him. His manhood was broken, and his forehead was damp with a sweat of agony. Then suddenly came a terrible flood of grief, dropping tears, great as those of Pantagruel, a distress that shook him and made him grip his under lip with set teeth to choke this overwhelming anguish. No woman could have seen him without tears, no man without pity.

That she had left him for ever was not a matter for present realisation, time was for remorse of his own conduct—for his own Gethsemane. Crushed and calm his eye at length saw the second letter as it lay on the floor where his arm had brushed it. He stopped to pick it up, and saw that it was addressed in the masculine hand that he had recognised on the letter that had told him of Charity's innocence only the day before. He saw its meaning before he read it, and the master passion of jealousy again seized him, as, with trembling fingers, he sought the contents of the envelope :

“DEAR MR STRACHAN,—Charity has thrown in her lot with me. She has left the old life and is going to start afresh. I love her absolutely and completely, and as soon as possible I shall make her my wife. If you have any respect for her

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feelings you will not seek to interfere in any way. It is my intention to devote myself to her happiness.

"GEORGE GRAHAM."

That man should not marry her!—by God he should not! Jealousy said that, and once more he experienced the transport of rage, and abandoned himself to it. He sprang up to pace the room, measuring the small floor again and again with long rapid strides. He must prevent the marriage, he *would* prevent it. He seized his hat to go out and do so at once, and he ran to the station where he had to wait an hour for the train. His body trembled with agitation, and his thoughts sped to Brighton faster than the train itself. She should return to him, he would cast himself at her feet and make her see that he still loved her, that she was necessary to his existence, that he would not return without her. He would give her such evidence of his abject humiliation and his love that she would be bound to forgive him. She should see the heart in him as he saw it himself, and if her love did not pity him her humanity should. She *must* know that he loved her from the evidence of the past, and she would have greater faith in her past with him than in those old days with George Graham, who had proved himself unworthy of her love by rejecting it. Thus he created a feverish hope to spur him in his task of self-abasement, and in that hope he took confidence of his success.

From Brighton station he began to run as if the prevention of an immediate marriage depended upon the speed of his legs. A cab passed, and he hailed it. He thought that he might be too late, and at the suggestion he was mad, he was a fury. But he would see her and prevent the marriage in spite of all the laws of special licence, even if he had to forbid the ceremony in the church. He would not hesitate at anything to get her back. Only when he had rung Graham's front-door bell did he allow himself cooler thoughts, and when the door was opened by a page he asked for Mr Graham in an even voice. Mr Graham was out was the answer that sent chill blood down his spine. The boy did not know when he would return—in fact Mr Graham had gone to London, leaving the information that he might be away for some days.

He saw himself outwitted, and bitterness gave a fierceness to the tone in which he asked the servant if he could say if Mrs Strachan had called. The page showed some surprise :

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"Not as I know of, sir; leastways I don't know a lady of that name."

"A tall lady—dark, dressed in dark blue."

"I think there was a lady like that here yesterday. She had tea in the drawing-room with Mr Graham. Perhaps the butler might know her name. I'll ask him if you'll come in, sir."

"No, it does not matter. Has the lady been here to-day?"

"No, sir."

He turned to descend the steps when the page asked him if he would leave his name.

"No, it is not important. I will write to-morrow. Did Mr Graham say where he would stay in London?"

"He told the butler to send letters to his club, sir."

He saw it all: she had gone away with Graham with the intention of being married as soon as possible, and he was too late! He stumbled blindly to the gate, stunned with the shock. There was nothing left for him but bitterness and jealousy, and, hugging both, he returned to Pevensey.

He did not enter the cottage, but walked about in a moonless night, dragging spiritless limbs through the mud and smothering darkness. The walk, without aim, had no interest for him; he thought that nothing that the world contained would have any interest for him again. How he would get through the days that were to follow was a matter for speculation. Would she ever think kindly of him? he wondered. He thought that the pleasures and luxury with which she would now be surrounded, and for which she had so often sighed, would drive such considerations from her mind. A reflex feeling seemed to sweep away the ambitions for which he had strived, and in its flood he saw himself a literary lost soul. He was forsaken, neglected, superlatively miserable. No one loved him, he had no friends, and his work had been denied. It was a damned world!

He was of no account in such a world, and realising this he thought of suicide. He would leave a letter asking her forgiveness and giving his own. The revenge would be cheap and stage-like, but it would be effective, and the contemplation of such a sensation gave him a morbid satisfaction. Then the thought of the effect that such a letter and action would have upon her occurred to him, and he had contempt for his own melodramatic proposal. She would be horrified; he knew that, and the thought that he could give her further

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pain was pain to him. He had loved her, she had been his ; there was satisfaction in remembering that. He loved her still and had lost her—that was the pain to drive him to tear himself to tatters. She had had understanding and appreciation of him, she had given him enthusiasm. What a companion for a man ! What a terrible loss was his ! He damned the man who had gained her.

He was experiencing the sensations of the mighty Florentine through Purgatory, and the cleansing process was painfully severe. In the ordeal he trod many heavy miles, not knowing how far he went. Day was welling up from the east, and the morning was shivering as he reached the house that was empty of her presence, feeling that he would have to give it up and go and live elsewhere—drown himself in the whirl of London, perhaps. He struck a match in the darkened sitting-room, aware of the chill atmosphere that follows on the smiting of Death. He gazed at the empty grate and shuddered. He had had no food for many hours, he could not eat, he must drink to warm himself and revive his heart. There was whisky in the cupboard. He took the bottle to bed, dulled his senses and slept.

Late in the next afternoon he awoke with splitting head, his brain too thick to think. He groaned and hid the light from his eyes, lying quiescent through succeeding hours. He found that he was brought to confront his unhappy self, to give conscience an account for a reason why he had done love an unnatural violence. It was then that the debt for moments of past selfishness was doubly paid.

In the evening he heard Eunice French below, and called for tea and food. She told him that she had come before and found him asleep. He had his excuses, and bade her supply his wants and leave him.

He had a night of tossing, summoning his heart to brace him for the future. He must work to kill agony, and he rose early, resolved to settle down to it.

He took a pen to write, and it seemed to suggest the thought that he should write to her. There was just the chance that it might reach her before it was too late. What a fool he had been not to think of this before ! He wrote at once :

“ If God would speak He would tell you that I am punished and repentant. Come, Charity, back to me and say that I am forgiven. Let me see you, if only for half-an-hour. Dearest love—dearest wife, come to me.”

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If that did not bring a reply he was lost indeed. Time, in the hours of waiting for it, was clogged in passage : minutes seemed like hours, hours like days. He could not work until he received her reply, and he wandered aimlessly in the vicinity of the cottage, always meeting the postman and always receiving a negative answer to his question of a letter for himself.

Three days passed thus, and then he was forced to believe that nothing that he could write or say would bring her back. She had ignored his appeal, and by not answering it had confirmed the resolution she had conveyed to him in her letter.

The mental agony of the last few days had a physical effect. He grew thin : a mournful mockery of himself, his face bleak as a moor under east wind. He was overwrought with thinking, and looking forward he saw nothing before him but black midnight. Surveying that he lost hope, and began to wish for the desires of the profligate that he might drown himself in sensuality, and one night he went into a town and paced the streets, only to find his fancy for vice abhorrent. He returned home and went to bed.

It was when he was denied the daily sight of her that he knew how precious she had been. Wanting her presence he sought comfort in dwelling with her shadow, but when his mind had pictures of her in the company of George Graham he writhed at the view like a man in hell. She was permanently imprinted on his vision : her fine, deep-chested figure, her face with its brown eyes seeing visions, her animation and buoyancy. He saw all this and more and felt himself damned.

Though there were visible changes in his outward appearance, it was within that he was most devastated. His mind was charred, and having no one to reproach him he continually reproached himself. Yet he had blame for fortune as well, that had handled him so badly ; all might have been different had he achieved worldly success. It was his human nature that thus prompted him to the invention of excuses for himself. He therefore conceived himself the victim of a dominant power that had exercised its forces upon him without ruth. Thus he had partial apology for his bewailings, and the martyr air which he sometimes allowed himself. He had exhibited pagan vices, but those results of paganism had been the outcome of fatality ; and in this manner he took small comfort of the shadows of solace.

As time passed he grew aware of the necessity of informing Eunice French that her mistress would never return to

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the cottage. The fiction that she had gone home to see her sick father, as Eunice imagined, could no longer be considered truth. The woman had her questions. He relied upon his knowledge of her life with her Alfred Mepham to gain her sympathy and seal her mouth until he left the village. He called her into the room, told her what was necessary, with little excuse for himself, and dissolved the woman to tears with the story. Her sympathy was with Charity, and he had no blame for her on that account. He had to endure a penance, and the end of the quarter would see the end of his connection with the village.

XXXIII

DISQUIETING thoughts were being spun by Charity's brain. On the morning after her flight she opened her eyes to feel, as recollection dawned, her heart fall like a plummet. She had left Euean and come to George. That was the realisation, and George was her lover.

Action was necessary to balk discomforting reflections, and she sprang out of bed, dressing rapidly. George called while she played with her breakfast, and left after a prudent ten minutes of her company. During a later walk they mapped the immediate future: a detailed expansion of his plan of the night before. Then came her visit to Halnaker, where Misery and its attendants were personified in the persons of her mother and brothers, and Despair in her stricken father, helpless and peevish for the well-being of his affairs, threatening bankruptcy. The anxiety caused by her parent's illness excused deep questionings on the part of her mother, as to her condition of life. For some days the girl made herself a slave for work in the troubled household, hourly expecting that she might be betrayed into divulging her concerns, and, at length, leaving her old home with relief that she had not added to her mother's troubles. There would be time enough for disclosure when her own plans had operated, and when she knew of the turn of her father's illness.

George met her in London to conduct her to her lodging, and bearing the news that he would have to return to Brighton for a couple of days to arrange the business of his absence. He had thought it best not to give his friends any announcement of marriage until the last moment; but he intended to see Admiral Sheepshanks on the following evening. In the interval she was to purchase a suitable outfit for her trip, and pay any bills she owed, and for these purposes he handed her a generous packet of bank-notes. She had the thought of relief in being able to discharge the bill for the ball-dress that had been the immediate cause of so much of her trouble, but the thanks she gave him haltingly for the gift were due to a hesitancy she had in accepting it.

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Admiral Sheepshanks sought his friend the next evening to prattle politics. The Sea Dog, warming himself with Schiedam, was in rosy humour. Conversation had flagged, and Graham broke the lull :

"You've been like a father to me, Admiral."

The Sea Dog rolled a questioning eye :

"I have the future of your navy before me, my boy ; that is the future of your country. We want help in the House, and when you get there you and I stand together. If I can push you forward I carry out your father's part. We fight without your father, but I do the best I can to push you on."

"Yes, I owe you thanks for that, my friend. But you have been a father to me in other ways, of which, I believe, you have taken no account, and therefore I think I have a claim for your blessing. I am going to be married."

The concussion of the shell caused the Admiral to overturn his glass. His mouth gaped in a face visibly white under sunburn.

"Merciful powers, George !—This after my views !"

"My dear friend, I felt that you would not take it well—at first, but I shall do you the injustice to prove that your views are wrong. I take a three weeks' holiday for the wedding trip. No time will be wasted in long preparations for the marriage, which will be quiet and away from here. The serious illness of my fiancée's father is good enough excuse for that. Besides, the present signs of the speedy dissolution of the Government are a consideration in not absenting myself too long from the constituency. Therefore, you must not take it ill if you do not witness the ceremony."

"I would not witness it if the Admiralty increased my pension to service pay ! You have done for yourself, George Graham ! You will probably ruin the British Empire by your mad action !—You and I were to have fought for the navy in the House—we'd have taken a lead, the Government would have been with us—votes overwhelmingly in the majority. All my plans for the future guarding of your country would have followed the naval vote. Now you have ruined all ! I would not be in your boots, young man !"

Graham saw a glitter of water in the Old Dog's eyes, and a desired smile was instantly repressed :

"There'll be no difference, Admiral. I promise to work as hard—harder, if possible. Grant me the three weeks. I go to town to-morrow to make some preparations."

"Your wreck comes sooner than I thought. You've not

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been open with me, George. If you had not kept your engagement a secret I might have had a chance. Your guns boom in the dark to spring a surprise on me. It's easy to be effective if you choose to spring a mine. It's not fair. You must have manoeuvred carefully to have kept your engagement from the public's ears. I don't like the look of it ! ”

“ There have been reasons, and as a matter of fact, the engagement was renewed only quite recently. My father was against the marriage—would not see the lady, though had he done so she would have captured him.”

“ She is the woman who pulled you out of the sea ? ”

“ She is that lady.”

“ Your father was a wise man not to see her. If you had been taught to swim properly she would not have been the ruin of the Capitol.”

“ The Capitol won't be ruined. You'll like her when you meet, Admiral. I ask three weeks' leave of absence, and she shall win you over the hour we return ! ”

“ Never ! I'll not meet her ! You'll drag her into politics ! That is as bad as having a spy aboard the ship. Women talk, and they talk the wrong way. I go.”

He went, and Graham had an hour to himself of pain mingled with amusement at being the cause of his old friend's displeasure. Then he wrote a brief personal paragraph announcing his engagement to, and forthcoming marriage with, Miss Woodhams, stating that owing to serious illness in the bride's family the ceremony was to be celebrated privately in London. For an hour he argued with himself as to the necessity for this deception, but finally he wrote a letter requesting the publication of the announcement, and sent it to the editor of a local newspaper.

In the morning, before he left for London, he received a note, delivered by a messenger :

“ MATE GEORGE,—I've tossed on my bed like a yacht on a stormy sea, and you have the satisfaction of knowing that you have deprived me of six hours' good sleep, a serious enough matter to a man at my time of life. Well, happy is the fool who is not aware that he is a fool. They who will not hear the bee's buzzing get stung in the end. Remember that ! This note is to send you forgiveness ; but I don't condone—bear that in mind. I have had some relief in the thought that you may yet send sons into your navy. Send 'em into the navy, every Jack, or I'll not be godfather at a

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christening. You owe the country compensation for treating it so scurvily, and you owe me compensation for not inviting me to the wedding, though I would not have been present had I been asked. Your politics are ruined, of course ; but I can fight a sinking ship though it be wrecked by a woman. I'll see this potential mother of sailors when you bring her back with you, though my guns will be shotted. Warn her.

"EVERARD CRAVEN SHEEPSHANKS."

George Graham had to laugh. He acknowledged the letter with gratitude, and promised the Admiral a good fight if ever they became allied. Then he summoned his house-keeper, gave her certain instructions, and made preparations for his departure.

He returned to Charity in London by the early morning train. Her inclination was to melancholy until his persistent brightness had its due effect upon her, and when the night boat was well out in the Channel she was, to all appearance, the bright, delightful, desired and realised woman he would have her be.

She had decided that, having placed a seal upon the past, she had all reason to be happy. A new life had begun for her ; and Paris—the golden city of her dreams—was about to become a reality. Paris with its myriad lights, its Mediterranean flow of people, its tall houses and wide squares, its art, its vivacity, the poetry of it all ! She had imagined it so often that she felt that her present visit was but one in a long acquaintance.

Graham broke her dream :

"Are you happy, dearest ?"

"Yes, quite happy."

"And why ?"

"It is because—because we are going to Paris. Paris has been my dream for years."

In the darkness she did not see the shade that passed over his face. He had the sinking thought that, for the present, he must be satisfied with a view of her heart through a fence ; but he did not allow his voice to betray the state of his feelings :

"You must buy some gowns there."

"What, more ?"

"Of course. All fashionable women who go to Paris buy gowns there."

"You are very good to me, George."

Paris, lovely with leafage, merry, busy, bustling, burst

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upon her view to take away her breath. The warm air was alive with chatter, the streets, as they drove to their hotel, were giddy with a flow of men and women : priests, soldiers, gendarmes, workmen, grisettes. Charity, at the view, had the desire for unbridled pleasure, for pleasure in excess. She anticipated sensations which she felt it was merely a matter of hours to realise, and the whole woman in her was urged to delirious recklessness. Pleasure, romance, life were within her grasp, and she was going to enjoy all.

The wine of excitement intoxicated her brain, and dispersed the fatigue of the journey. She declined George's suggestion of rest, and told him that she preferred to go out as soon as their meal was concluded. The crowded *salle-à-manger* of the hotel, the silently moving waiters, the hum of conversation made her wish for a prompt familiarity with this new world. The very food she ate seemed to have a strange, delightful mystery; and when Graham proposed a drive in the city she could have clapped her hands like a child. The excitement of the chase was hers already, and the misery of the past was wiped out in a near contemplation of the joys of the immediate future.

In Paris they spent Decameronian days, revelling in a perfumed air of almost Eastern sensuality. To her this new life immediately came to be the fulfilment of her long hope of luxury, the glorious prelude to her hope of power; and, steeped in it, she felt that her love for George Graham, the friend of her pleasures, the magician who had made the revelation for her, had increased already. To her he meant romance, power, brilliancy, the champagne of life. He seemed to anticipate all her desires, he was as kind and gentle as woman could wish a man to be. The joy of possession was his present happiness; her simple presence was a luxury superposed on pleasure. It suggested such sensuous things as languorous Eastern scents: musk and attar of roses; the sight of precious stones, rich and deep in colour: sapphires, emeralds, rubies; gold and rare ivories. The sensation was one difficult to account for, but he told her that in herself he had a realisation of the beautiful houris of the Thousand and One Nights. The metaphor pleased her, and she answered that on their return to England she would read the book and judge of his pronouncement.

These, then, were her long-desired gala days. She wished them to be splendid, and they were. Extravagance might have been fairy godmother to George Graham, for he in-

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dulged her every whim. A slave in Pleasure's galley she tried to make herself believe that one day of her present life was worth a year of all former pleasures that she had experienced. But the memory of that old life! That was the ghost that often enough waved spectral arms above the feast, and made her aware of a bitterness in the sweets of it.

Emerging from such occasional shades to view troubles past from a mountain bathed in a blaze of sunshine, she made up her mind to be happy. She had everything she desired for her comfort, and she told herself that all her future wishes would be granted. The wish to love George as once she had loved Euean? That would be realised, too; the future of her love, she thought, depended on George himself. It would be impossible not to love a man who was the source of her pleasure of every moment, who would lead her yet to the higher delectable mountains of which now she had so near a view, and who was dowered with almost all the gifts she most admired in an English gentleman. It would be absurd of her to pretend that she could not be happy. She turned eyes of amorous languor upon him, folded her arms around his neck, and kissed his forehead.

She could not spell regret for the life she was to live with George until the time of their marriage, for her convictions were certain on this point: she offended no just laws. Had Euean given her no real cause for leaving him she would have merited the fiercest fires of condemnation. That was her feeling. She had long since over-ruled the doctrine which declared it wrong for a man and woman, not legally bound to each other, to live together. Her reasons were incontrovertible, and the strongest of them was the mutual happiness of the parties who elected so to live.

She had a thought that her return to England would open the opportunity for Euean to persuade her to go back to him. On that point she would be firm: she had done with him and the old life for ever. If he made an attempt to see her she would decline to meet him. It would be best for both, and easier for her. She knew that he had persistency, but rather than yield up the position she had taken she would marry George at once. She had suffered to win her prize of place in the world, and she would do all in her power to retain it. Then the alarm that these reflections had given her was calmed in the recollection that Euean would have no reason to suspect that she had not married George. She had a sigh of relief in the remembrance of that.

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In the privacy of their room at the hotel, some few days after their arrival in Paris, George drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to her. She saw that it was addressed to her in Euean's handwriting, and for the moment surprise and a slight agitation would not allow her to open it. Graham spoke :

"It came for you after you had gone to see your father, Charity. I did not give it to you before because I was afraid that it might have the effect of making you alter your intention not to go back to Euean. The act was a selfish one on my part."

She paused to consider :

"And you are still afraid that it may have that effect ?"

"It may ; but I could not honourably keep it from you any longer. I expect that it is an appeal, and I am aware that I run the risk of losing you after you have read the contents."

"There is no risk. See !"

She tore the unopened letter to a dozen pieces.

"You are sure that you have done right ?"

"Yes,—I think so. It is best that I should forget Euean altogether as I have made up my mind to do so. Whatever the letter contains it comes too late. I am going to be happy—I am going to be happy."

"Then, if you are satisfied, so am I. You have made me very happy, dear girl. I confess that I dreaded the result of that letter for myself. Now I know that I am yours, and you are mine. We are going to be everything to each other, are we not ?"

She brightened beautifully :

"Yes, everything ! I love you more now, George, than I ever loved you before. Love is growing stronger, as I said it would."

He gave an exclamation of joy, and kissed her tenderly on the mouth.

From that moment he regarded her as another woman. She was gay and brilliant, often merry, and, when a subject interested her, was the most delightful of conversationalists. But for the look of the woman who has suffered that sometimes came into her eyes, she had the appearance of one whose life had been without black, and as these occasions were observable only in times of quiet he determined to allow her no pause from pleasure to dwell with any imps that might be lurking in the caves of her memory, and to this end he prevented all her wants by his supplies.

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Plans for a day's excursion were swept away on a morning after breakfast, when George, returning from the streets, broke into the room where she was dressing for the drive :

" I have to announce a disappointment for you, sweetheart. Parliament has been dissolved, and it is necessary that we should return to England at once."

She expected new excitements in the prospect of the forthcoming election, and had no keen disappointment for those she must now relinquish. While she was packing her boxes for the homeward journey a cablegram from Admiral Sheepshanks was delivered to George :

" Octavius Cæsar desires Antony's return to Rome without delay."

Graham read the wording to Charity with a smile :

" And Cleopatra accompanies him."

XXXIV

ENGLAND muffled in woolly fog could not be taken as an omen for brightness in Charity's immediate future. The meteorological prospect served to remind her that the world had its grey humours, and invited a miserable reflection on difficulties that were likely to occur as the outcome of events in her recent past. She shivered behind her newspaper, but George, sitting mute in a corner of the railway compartment, was too absorbed in contemplation of political plans for immediate action to spare attention for her state of feeling, or the condition of weather. He had telegraphed instructions from Paris to his agent to summon his committee the hour after his arrival, and now he was mentally making points for the canvass.

The carriage met them at Brighton station, and Graham's man informed him that Admiral Sheepshanks had called twice that morning in the hope of seeing him. At "Downlands" he made a hasty introduction of his new housekeeper to Charity, changed his clothes, and after slight refreshment left word that Admiral Sheepshanks should follow him to the committee-room, and drove away.

The chilliness of her reception in England's raw climate was a penetration of the fog to Charity's heart. It fell heavily when she found herself alone with the servants—new and strange—in this great house, and she felt that the pleasure with which she had anticipated her entry as its mistress, was now a pleasure of wafted cloud, leaving her cold and stiff. The housekeeper knocked to offer a letter that had arrived that morning. She could scarcely conceal her agitation on observing that it was in Euean's handwriting, and she wondered if she had become an object of curiosity to the woman standing before her.

"Thank you, Miss Fenn. Please return in half-an-hour as I wish to have some talk with you."

Seated she broke the seal, and to her surprise found that the outer envelope was but a covering to an inner missive addressed to her at Pevensy by her mother. So Euean had observed a certain delicacy in forwarding her letter, and she felt that she could have given him thanks for that. She took

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up his envelope again and examined the handwriting she knew so well. It was addressed "Mrs Graham," and from that fact she judged that he considered her already married to George, and a curiosity as to his feelings when he wrote the name immediately obtruded.

Then she read her mother's letter. It contained news to further depress her. Her father had achieved convalescence only to be faced by a crowd of creditors omnivorous to swallow all he could cast them, and more. He spoke wildly of "clearing stock and stick" and taking the family to Canada, overflowed with the statistics and information of Government pamphlets and papers from emigration offices, was querulous because his years offered a bar to the suggestions of his mind, and, in despair, ran on blanks and impracticabilities. Charity's heart was lead.

A noise in the outer hall drove off her reverie and a servant entered to say that Admiral Sheepshanks desired to know if she would receive him. Lately she had longed to meet the man of whom George had said that he was one with original ideas on women; and the sudden suggested hope that she might battle with and conquer him before George's return, gave her ardour for the encounter. She told the man to show the visitor in, rose to the mirror, flattened a curl on her forehead, and received the Admiral standing. She had sprung to life, full-armed, as Athene from the head of Zeus, her plan to open with a veiled attack, and to this end she advanced upon the Sea Dog with an extended hand and a smile that was as the suggestion of a bright sword ready to flash from the sheath:

"Admiral Sheepshanks, of whom I have heard so much! It is a real pleasure to have George's oldest friend the first to welcome me!"

He showed her old Castilian courtesy, accepting her hand with respectful cordiality:

"It was my duty to come, ma'am, and I'm gratified to give a lady pleasure. I came to see George, who has day and night work before him. I'm glad to hear that he has not lost time in putting on the collar. He has gone to meet the committee, I understand. You are wise to relinquish claim on him while his party calls. This is a stupendous moment in the history of your country, ma'am. We have to return a Conservative Government or the country is lost. A Conservative Government means an efficient navy. That's what I look for. I hope you had fine weather in Paris, ma'am?"

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"Delightful! You must allow me to tell you of our trip when we are better acquainted, although George has talked so much about you that I feel I know you very well already."

"I'll listen with pleasure after the Election, but you should know on what terms we meet. George should have told you."

The brusquerie of his present manner did not disconcert her:

"I believe that he has told me everything about you. I understand that you are a misogynist, and it has been one of my ambitions to meet a real misogynist."

"I shall disappoint you. My attitude towards your sex is not that of a hater; it has rather to do with the proper place of woman in the universal scheme."

"That sounds antagonistic, and I daresay we *shall* disagree, for I am sure that your views and mine are opposed. I've been longing to meet you in battle; and I'm going to conquer, Admiral."

The Sea Dog was for postponing the encounter with the smiling enemy. He begged to be allowed to go and meet George.

"No, Admiral. I can't agree to that. He must be back shortly. He asked for an hour and a half. Besides, I wish to know you better before he returns. I have come like a stranger to this house to be immediately deserted by George, and I must throw myself on your protection. You daren't refuse the request of a lady, or your disclaimer of being a misogynist will appear like a subterfuge to gain a later advantage. Sit down, please, and let us talk."

He yielded the outworks, and took a chair, with a gallant excuse for surrendering so much:

"It is difficult to refuse so small a request to so charming a lady."

"You can flatter women, Admiral. There you show weakness. It is a bad sign in one who has practically declared himself an opponent of my sex. I begin to foresee that my conquest will be easier than I anticipated."

"You think me an opponent, ma'am? You are wrong. I have my views on the subject of women and politics. That is due to patriotism. Patriotism stands first with me."

"George has called you the 'Grand Patriot.' You have ideas on Empire building; so have I, but our methods differ. You are a fighter."

"I fight for my country, and wage war for my opinions."

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If my opinions fall I shall still triumph in remembering that they were honest. But they won't fall! I'm for your navy. There is no other way of building up the Empire but by the help of your navy, ma'am. Providence helps the biggest navy. England is therefore England."

"There are more peaceful ways, Admiral. Our greatness is due to peace."

"And peace is due to your navy. We owe all we have to our strength; that is why we are respected. England must be respected; that means a strong navy. Big commerce means a strong navy—you must protect your riches or you haven't any; riches mean respect."

"That is your patriotism! Your navy and army against those of other countries! That is the patriotism that is but another spelling of selfishness. Lust of conquest has too long been called patriotism because it is a prettier word."

"Are you a Little Englander, ma'am?"

"I'm a reformer, and a patriot, too; but my patriotism aims at making the race happier, nobler, more generous. I'm a peaceful patriot, and as a reformer I'd start with the laws. Parliament must be first, and I'd begin my reforms there."

"Your navy must be first—your navy first and Parliament second: your navy for the country, and Parliament for the navy, with a strong Tory Government in power. Tories to support your navy if you'd have one."

"I've said that I'm a peaceful reformer, Admiral. We have social problems to deal with that are far greater than your schemes for conquest. We want new and improved laws, and women to assist in making them. Female suffrage must come as the integral part of women's rights. All women who think about politics see that."

"Angels don't want votes, and only plain women talk about their 'rights.' As to what women think in politics matters little; it's what they do. They have too much power as it is—serpents beguiling political husbands!"

"Women have the cause of women at heart; men can't have while they are bent on selfish conquests. You men make war and get the glory; we women have the misery."

"You have the greater glory of breeding the warriors, ma'am."

"Your talk is all of increasing the navy. Where is your feeling for the taxpayer?"

"I haven't the slightest. If the taxpayer desires a peace-

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ful life he must pay for it. The country has to be awakened to that : it needs rousing to live : it is like a beggar sleeping in the snow—wake him or he sleeps to death. The present Government is the meanest that has disgraced the country—a united band of tailors, ma'am, clipping the bill of naval expenditure with vulgar shears."

"I agree that the country sleeps, but its indifference is to the need of reform in the life of its people. We want philosophers—thinkers to show the way, and legislators to make the road. I speak on behalf of the necessity for increasing human happiness."

"You are a remarkable woman, ma'am, but you put me in a fog."

"I can shock you, Admiral."

"You have shocked me already, ma'am."

Her mouth looped to a smile :

"Then I must ask for your indulgence, without knowing wherein I have offended."

"I hoped to find that you had no political views. I thought that you had none when I saw you, but you can't read a woman by her face. One might almost think you French : you talk as if fencing. But I give you my forgiveness. It is easy to do that to the wife of one of the country's solid young men, even though he has steered for the rocks. I forgive him that because I must—he backs everything for your navy. He may yet be a hero of the country if you will let him."

A smile fluttered on her lips, and she had a picture of England hugging a hero. She felt that she had pride of and love for George then. The dream dispelled, she was anxious for the Sea Dog's views on political women, and she asked for them.

"The political woman is one to be watched and controlled, ma'am. To my mind all Members of Parliament should be either bachelors or widowers to escape the continuous subtle feminine influence. Women spoil politics. What do they know about your navy, for instance ? You can see why I opposed George's marriage. He defied me at a time when it was too late to depose him from the candidature. A man cannot serve his wife and the country ; one must go by the board. If George neglects you, don't come to me for sympathy, ma'am. I've my reasons for being averse from the political woman. She has the prying nose : she worms out state secrets, and then rushes with them to her friends,

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bidding 'em keep 'em dark. Women are the pests of politics ! ”

“ You have uncivilised views on the subject of women, Admiral.”

“ Common-sense views, ma'am.”

“ Schopenhauerian.”

“ Schopenhauer ! There was a man for you ! ”

“ A man-monster ! and you'd have George like him ! Fie, Admiral ! ”

“ I'd have him wedded to his country in the House ; I've prayed for it. I tell you flatly, ma'am, George Graham has not married with my approval. A man has no business to marry on the eve of going into Parliament. He must neglect his country or his wife, and it is generally the former. All politicians' wives make the mistake of expecting their husbands to better themselves for their sakes, forgetting the country. Those are my views. Are we opponents ? ”

“ Certainly ! You are showing your guns. It is what I have waited for. My idea is that it is the married man who best serves his country.”

“ A point conceded with reservation. He should be proud who marries the British woman—English, Irish or Scots. The British woman has the most splendid mission of the women of earth.”

“ Please solve the riddle.”

“ To your navy you owe your Empire ; to your British woman you owe your seamen. She is the blessed of the earth.”

“ And I called your opinions on women uncivilised ! I ask pardon for that. Nevertheless I prefer to dwell on peace rather than war. Other things besides the navy are to be considered.”

“ It is to your navy that you owe peace, as the Articles of War declare : ‘ whereon, under the good providence of God, the wealth, peace and safety of the country doth chiefly depend.’ The British Navy rests on British mothers, ma'am. It is well to remember that. I salute the power of your sex.”

“ Just now you spoke of a reservation, Admiral.”

“ I'd reserve the Parliamentary man from marriage. Woman is snares and nets to gain her husband. I don't complain of that if only she will leave the public man free to do his duty. That can't be if she marries him.”

“ Snares and nets that men like to be caught in.”

“ That is because women snare with nets of silk.”

“ Women have to follow their instinct to carry on Nature's

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most urgent work. There are not enough men to allow exemption to any class."

"We know something of each other's opinions, Mrs Graham. That should be sufficient excuse for a freemasonry between us."

"Please continue, Admiral. I've character enough not to be shocked by anything you may say."

"I was going to say that the laws should allow a plurality of wives, and so leave public men free to do their duty. Man, naturally, has polygamous tendencies, and the cry of the world is for population. I amaze you, ma'am?"

"No; I'm only surprised at the broadness of your views. I can scarcely think you are in earnest, and I don't say that I agree. Rather my plan would be adopt the old Greek compulsion that made all men marry."

"I'm in deadly earnest, ma'am. Allow every man, not politically engaged, to have two wives and you do away with spinsterhood. Monogamy had its origin in masculine poverty and female scarcity, conditions that no longer obtain. There is a naval view to nearly every question under the sun, and so there is a naval view to this question, for if you increase your ships you must provide men for them. The function of women in ancient Sparta was to give strong and healthy children to the state. I'd have it so in England."

"You'd compel every woman to fulfil her natural duties?"

"Yes, for woman has a duty to her country equally with man, and her one and only duty is to provide and bring up children—I'm backed by Plato—that is her desire, her instinct, her privilege: the only thing for which she was created. It is the one thing in which she beats man, who is otherwise self-reliant—witness the men of your navy. Allow every able-bodied man two wives, and it will no longer be necessary to talk of sex problems: your unmarried girls will cease to whine, result happiness; the family will be divided between two mothers, result healthy children, stronger mothers; total result a stronger, healthier, happier nation."

"Other problems would immediately arise: jealousy between co-wives, increased cost of living; total, husband's misery."

"Both problems easier to solve than the riddle of the spinster. Living would naturally have to be more simple, less luxurious. Ask any two unmarried women if they would be prepared to sacrifice a few dresses a year, share one husband, and make up their minds to live in amity, or go without a husband altogether. I know the answer! The maternal

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instinct over-rules all pettier ones. Besides I'd have laws to deal with refractory wives : a new law of divorce."

"You'd set up a new standard of morality."

"And do away with condoned immorality. The vice of the streets would be heard of only in history. Women must marry, so must men—public men, too. Then it is time for them to retire from public life and serve the country in other ways. Younger bloods will be ready to fill their places."

"You are unreasonable, Admiral."

"The unreasonable man is the man who improves the state of society. He has fixed ideas, and his eternal purpose is to shape society to them. Your reasonable man spends his time in endeavouring to mould himself to things as they exist, and therefore improves nothing. I take your remark as a compliment."

"Evidently you are not going to admit to losing points."

"Madam, we are not at war, for I see that we agree better than I expected. I find fault with your sex for not allowing the men who have their country's good at heart full liberty to pursue their duty. As I have already told you the married man considers his wife and family before his country, and the country suffers in consequence."

"Am I to take any part of those remarks as applying to myself?"

"If you can think that I am honest and not rude. Women have their instincts to battle with; that is their excuse. In the love chase it is the woman who hunts. The man may experience some of the alleged enjoyment of the fox in being hunted, but the woman has the greater sport, because the hunt is at her initiative."

"That is not altogether true. I am afraid that we shall quarrel yet, Admiral. Strangers, too!—It is true that women must marry if the race is not to perish; so must men for that matter. The great necessity is to provide every healthy woman with a husband, a thing that you legislators ignore. No fear of army or navy then. Only ill-health should debar a man or woman from marriage. Marry every woman and you do away with much of the worst forms of vice. Society wars against the instincts of human nature, and condemns poor women who follow instinct rather than men-made laws."

"I admit all that, but I must emphasise my exception. My plan of two wives to a man is the remedy. You think it scandalous? It is not so scandalous as the evils brought about by celibacy."

"We were speaking of woman's jealousy—it is that that

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would stand in the way of such a revolution, even if the laws allowed it."

"And for that reason woman is her own enemy; she'd therefore lose one of the best and most necessary things of her life on account of a petty instinct. Whether is it better for a woman to share a husband with another of her sex, or to remain cursed by lifelong spinsterhood? Answer me that, ma'am."

Charity allowed a moment's pause for reflection, but did not give a direct reply to the question.

"You ignore the world's idea of morality, Admiral."

"The devil is the parent of morality, ma'am."

"My theory is that the emigration of women would do much to solve the problem. It is one that I have much at heart."

"So far as the marriage question is concerned I believe that it would do much; but by sending men and women abroad your navy loses sons. That is the great point, after all."

"The problem of the unmarried woman is greater, Admiral. It is woman's great work to secure a husband—and to secure him as soon as possible. Marry our women, and not only navy and army will gain, but so will the Empire in other ways. You can't deny that, Admiral."

His face was rippling:

"I am inclined to think that I disagree with you on side issues only."

"From the look of you, I should say you were a happy married man did I not know better."

"Appearances are deceptive; you would not say that a large mouth is the sign of a big appetite?"

She laughed, and riposted with the thrust direct:

"But why don't you marry?"

"I serve my country, ma'am."

'A bachelor I will
Live as I've liv'd still,
And never take a wife
To crucify my life.'

That's a bit of old Herrick. No, ma'am, I do not intend to become a retired M.P. if I can help it."

"Man is weak, woman is strong. You'll be victimised yet; and it shall be the object of my life to make a match for you. Your ungodly poetry shall not avail."

"As providence has been kind to some poor woman you

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should congratulate me for having foregone the opportunity of making her miserable."

George Graham returned, overflowing with the business of his committee meeting. He poured it out to Charity and the Admiral, pleased to see them already familiar. He talked almost to the dinner hour :

" You'll dine with us, Admiral ? "

" Not to-night. Instruct your wife to learn how to make pancakes and I come another evening. I've ordered them at my hotel."

" Then I drive you back."

The Admiral gave Charity a vice-regal bow :

" You may take hope, dear lady. I give you leave to subdue me when the Election is done with. Until then think me not the fool I look, as Plato advised his disciples. We part friends ?"

" We part friends, Admiral, and in the interval I shall mature my plans."

The two men took seats in the carriage. Graham immediately asked a question :

" What do you think of her, old friend ? "

" " She's pretty to walk with,
And witty to talk with,
And pleasant, too, to think on.' "

The pleasure that is next to that of admiring the woman the lover loves, in seeing that she has won the admiration of others, was George Graham's at this moment. Admiral Sheepshanks noted the effect of his reply :

" Don't think I've no qualifications to offer, Mate George. I've found that in robust encounters of the tongue your wife can hold her own : thrust, parry, give and take, and thrust again. We cannot all—thank heaven!—be brilliant. But she has ideas on politics that don't altogether please me—' woman's rights.' Women are for ever talking about their ' rights,' but never about their duties. Votes!—It's all talk! They should be satisfied to be wives and mothers. But they're not. To hear political women talk you'd take 'em for so many lady Oracles, incapable of erring. Among males the Pope only is infallible ; the whole female sex is infallibility, if you'd believe 'em. Still, my congratulations are sincere, and I think she'll leave your politics alone."

George Graham was prepared to appraise his friend's opinion at a higher value than he thought the latter would have him, and his report of the conversation to Charity bore congratulations on her feminine powers of impressing barbarous instincts.

XXXV

THE issue of George Graham's electoral address was an event to make the Admiral's back arch with pride. Graham reading the printed proclamation with the reverence the newly fledged author has for his first published work listened to his friend's comments with gratification.

"This is stuff to tickle, my boy. Your naval points tell: the electorate will prick their ears, or they're not English. You burn the Radical dogs with their own brands; they'll hop! I reinforce you at all meetings possible. I only regret that my own division calls me away. Chantry is my best substitute: he speaks well. Be anecdotal at your schoolroom meetings; you take the hearts of working men with stories. I shall return to back you at the Dome event; we'll get a blooming baronet—Sir William Haffenden shall have an oar; I've influence with him, and he knows the needs of your navy."

The Admiral departed for his constituency, leaving his friend heartened for the canvass. Under the circumstances of his present domestic life this political bustle was a healthy thing for George Graham. It rendered him cheerful and gave little time to face the probable truth that he had allied himself to a woman who had not yet given him her whole love. Such moments as he devoted to a consideration of the question were not without persuasion that her affection was a thing of growth—studied actions on her part helped the belief; and by his constant gentleness and attention she was aware that he strove daily to earn that which she withheld. She had times of self-depreciation that she could not force her heart into the way she would have it go. She felt herself the coldest of women, a Hecate who took no delight in her share of the earth, too conscious of the haunting dogs of Styx. Had not ambition and the craving of power been her props, she felt that she would have been unable to support her present anomalous existence. That she had given too high a price for the attainment of her desires was not her way of looking at the bargain, and in the pursuit of her chimera she found her-

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self thinking more of power than of love, and when memory stirred she sought to whelm it in bustle, sending her thoughts scurrying like mice.

She was not without dread that among those who came to make her acquaintance she might discover some who would recognise in her the quondam assistant of Mason Brothers. Every ring of the door bell was a summons to her courage to face possibilities of this kind, but the days of her initiation into Brighton society passed without a revelation of the thing she dreaded. The return of visits was almost equally dreaded on account of an uncertainty as to whom she might meet, and George's inability to accompany her on these occasions, on account of an active political canvassing, deprived her of the moral support which his presence would have afforded.

She met him one wind-torn afternoon as he came from committee, and she was driving homeward. He was conscious of the reaction that release from long hours of close work gives, and felt the necessity for a stretching of his limbs before the dinner hour. Charity stepped from the victoria and sent it home that she might walk with him. The promenade slowly degenerated to a march of slow steps, an examination of shop windows and confidences of small talk, when, in a press of the street crowd, Graham descried the approach of Lady Bindon's carriage with a pair of Hungarian steppers, and warned Charity to be prepared to return her ladyship's bow. Her face was turned half way to the approaching carriage when the catch of her eye on the face of a man, who walked before them, stopped the bow that should have met Lady Bindon's courtesy. Charity had recognised Euean, and spasmodically placing her hand on George's arm, involuntarily drew his attention to her pale and startled face :

"What is the matter, dearest ? Are you ill ?"

"No ! Yes ! That is I felt a sudden dizziness."

"Come into this shop and rest while I send for a cab."

"No, don't do that ! It is not necessary. I shall be better in a minute. I'm better now. I'd much rather walk. Let us go slowly. I'm rather tired ; I think I must have made too many calls to-day."

They continued their way homeward ; passing along the windy Parade in view of a high-leaping sea, her brain numb with the vision of the face of the man she had left for ever, whose features, drawn and swept of happiness, had told her in that one brief glimpse the tragedy of his suffering. She

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had felt at once that he had come to Brighton with the hope of seeing something of her, and her heart beat sledge-hammer blows when instinct told her that. There had been times in her recent past when she was unable to deny herself the knowledge that Euean must be suffering, and now ocular proof made that knowledge a greater severity. Her impulse had been to dart from George's side at once and seek this other man, if only to have speech with him. She had almost to exert physical control over herself to keep from so mad a thing, and George's further inquiries as to her state fell upon unheeding ears. Her disregard of his solicitude alarmed him, and he had signalled a cab, and assisted her inside without her having an apparent appreciable knowledge of his action. In a few minutes they had reached the house, and he led her to the little room they knew as her boudoir, and tenderly placed her on the couch. His layman's instinct prescribed her tea, but when it was brought her eyes were closed, and thinking that she slept he tip-toed from the room and entered the library, there to become buried brain deep in his political correspondence.

Her eyes opened at the closing of the door, and within a minute she was in her bedroom assuming a walking dress with shaking hands whose twitching fingers fretted at hooks and buttons. Short quick breaths and a pink in her cheeks told of her endeavour to suppress agitation. She must see Euean, her desire was at the point of fever, and it was hey for the mad errand! Cautiously moving she reached the street without discovery, and rapidly measured her steps along the road to that part of the Parade where she had seen him only half-an-hour before.

It was a hunt on cold scent, and as soon as she realised this she began to wonder what she should do and what she should say if she met him. She had a dread of the meeting then, and she crossed the road to pace the sea wall during the process of unravelling the tangled skein of thought.

Under a blackened ceiling over the Channel the sea was whipped by an urgent gale to the white of milk boiling to foam. Horizonward waves lined up in grey mass, swelled, moved ponderously forward, showing the flicker of white manes; came onward to the charge—supported by the southwest booming intermittently—trampled the leading ranks, were momentarily sun-lighted, cloud-gloomed. On they came, riding steadily, swelled yet, tossed dark detached seaweeds, gathered volume, power, might, and broke rank noisily in the

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mighty charge on shore. At the breaking they flung white spray, foamed, creamed lavishly in wide-spread suds, and combed back the pebbles in the swirl.

She stood to view the sea's grey rage, the wind flapping her skirt at the ankles. The glory of the leaping waves was to her turbulent mind as oil on swelling waters: she calmed. Calm after chaos brought clear thoughts that rang in her brain reverberations of remorse. "He whom I have deserted is suffering," was the monotonous iteration of her litany of punishment, and in the brief intervals of that mental repetition she heard, far off as yet, the faint bay of the hounds of retribution, and turning homeward she sought to flee from a terror that she knew she would have to dodge cunningly to evade.

Her thought was to smother the Past by means of the Present, but the Present would not give her prompt succour, and an immediate stifling was her desire. She thought that she had killed love, but it would not be gone: the skeleton sat on the headstone and gibbered at her. She shuddered as if under the spell of some potent night-fear. Then bracing herself to walk rapidly she returned, and arrived at the house with burning cheeks and wind-tossed hair.

She remembered that Admiral Sheepshanks had accepted on invitation to dine at "Downlands" that evening, and that she had cajoled him by offering to make pancakes for dinner. She had looked forward to this little event as an occasion for gaiety, but her present desire was for solitude. She knew that in her condition of mind to assume an affectation of high spirits would mean the summoning of all her powers to prevent such an assumption from appearing unnatural, and she nerved herself with a deep inflation.

She listened for a moment at the library door, then knocking gently she entered. George had not heard her, and she found him deep in his correspondence. She watched his bowed head, bent over a scratching pen, then made her presence known:

"Still busy, dear?"

"Hullo, sweetheart! Had a good sleep? Better, I hope?"

"Yes, much better, George. Don't forget that Admiral Sheepshanks is coming to dinner. It's almost time for you to dress."

"I'm so backward in my correspondence that I really think I shall have to indulge in the luxury of a private secretary."

"Why not allow me to answer your letters?"

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She slipped to the floor at his feet and clasped his knees, as if coaxing a personal favour from him. She was endeavouring to obliterate the vision of a haggard face from her memory.

She had relief when Admiral Sheepshanks sent word that an attack of gout kept him from her pancakes. "Gout was Inquisitors' torture that Providence should reserve for Radical maladministrators, and those of the leisured moneyed class who took statesmanship as a pleasant pastime. He owed a curse to a paternal port-drinking grandsire for the legacy; one who could not have given a thought to the possibilities of an heir-presumptive doing hard work for the navy, or he had drunk women's tea."

They went into dinner. George thought Charity not herself. Her lack of liveliness depressed him, and when the butler had left the room he wooed her to disburden the cause of her unhappiness:

"You must go to bed early, dear. You are not yourself to-night. If you are not better in the morning I shall send for Dr Hanson."

"I've been thinking, George. I think too much sometimes. Forgive me."

Her underlip quivered for a moment like a troubled child's.

"What's the matter, dear? See! Have some more champagne—your favourite wine."

He crossed to her side of the table, bearing the bottle. She drew a sigh and drank from the glass that he had refilled.

"Kiss me, George—I'm silly. There! Now I am better. I won't think any more. I've had one of my black fits to-day."

"What have you been thinking of? Let us talk it over."

"I've heard from home. Things are very bad there."

She referred to the letter sent to her under cover by Euean some weeks ago, and advanced it to mask the true cause of her depression.

"I thought that your father was better."

"He is, but money difficulties are their trouble. There is talk of selling the stock and going to Canada."

"That would be a pity. How much money is required to tide over the difficulty?"

"About a hundred pounds. Rent is owing, and father owes a big bill to the veterinary surgeon."

"Well, that need not trouble you. You shall send the money. I'll write a cheque in your name at once. You can cash it in the morning and send the money off."

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She burst into tears.

"Now that is silly of you, Charity!"

"I don't deserve it, George."

He laid a comforting hand on her bowed head.

"You deserve all I can do for you, dearest. Do you not love me?"

"Ye—s."

"Well, then, what is the matter?"

"You are so good to me."

"It is my happiness to make you happy."

"I know that, George, and it is that which hurts me. I am not fair to you."

"You mean—because you have not married me?"

"Yes."

"You have only to say the word, Charity, and we will go away and have it done quietly. You say that you love me. What is there to prevent our being married at once?"

"My love. I love you—I cannot help loving you, because you are so kind, but I do not feel that I love you well enough to marry you. It is that that troubles me."

"But you love me more now than you did when we went away?"

"Yes, I do—indeed."

"Then you will soon love me sufficiently to give your consent. Come now, my girl, cheer up!"

She moved her head in a slow mournful shake. He was for adding consolation:

"Well, we won't talk about it any more at present. Let us change the subject."

Brightness was excellently well assumed over dessert, and he, thinking he did well in assisting in the return of a livelier mood, insisted that she should drink more wine. She gulped the fire-kindling fluid until her eyes shone with light, the laugh sprang from her lips with undesired pathos, and reaction caused her to plunge into a whirl of merriment. Was she merry at heart? As well say that a human skeleton is merry because it grins. Merriment was splashed with tears, to which George, in the vein for a show of tenderness, was blind:

"You are happy now, dear?"

"Yes.—Oh, George, if it should be discovered that we are not married! You would be ruined, and through me!"

"What do we care about what people might say. I don't care." He snapped thumb and finger. "Not that! To

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have you is good enough for me until I have deserved to know that you will be mine for ever."

"You deserve that now, dear. I'm going to try my hardest to love you more, and—who knows?—perhaps after the Election we'll be married."

He was not urgent in ardent demonstrations of love, fearing that he might scare her. His study was to play the gentleman before her always, to gain her love through her respect for him.

"Let us talk of everyday things. Talk, dearest; you can rattle when you like."

"I am going to love you more, George. I shall try—try."

"Of course you will."

"I will, George. I swear it unless you give me up."

"I'll never do that!"

"It might be better for both of us."

"I never will! I have never loved woman but you!"

He bent to kiss her, and, involuntarily, she half-turned her face away.

They rose, she for bed, he to return to his uncompleted work. In her room she dismissed her maid, undressed herself slowly, and when she had extinguished the light and got into bed she discovered that her reflections, all the time she had been undressing, had been of Euean. She began to wonder what his letter to her, delivered by the hand of George, had contained, and if she had done right in destroying it. She did not feel that she had done right. Then she saw herself in the future pining for the love of the man she had deserted, hopelessly hungering for it, and she shuddered at the suggestion that her state might yet be this. The speculation led to a review of her life, and she found herself considering the mother she had deceived. There was no happiness in that—only black misery. She was not happy now—that must be admitted. She had never been happy for any long period of time, and she began to wonder why. She had striven long for happiness in love, and now she asked herself if she would ever attain it. She had lived with George Graham nearly two months—two months of that whirlwind of pleasure she had so often longed for, but in that two months she had not known one day of true happiness. Her thoughts ran about seeking the real reason for this misery, and ignoring it. She only knew that love seemed locked up and put away from her; that her natural food was denied her, and she began to think that she had a grievance against fate for depriving her of a

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rightful inheritance. Still reviewing the past she could not hide from herself the fact that she had experienced the nearest approach to the condition of life her heart desired during the time she had lived with Euean, and she felt tempted to free herself from her present existence and return to him. But George had been so good to her and her family that it would be unkind, impossible, to leave him—no, she could not think of it, and the pitiable thing was that she felt that she could not be sure of contentment in going back to live with Euean under his present circumstances of poverty. She had pity for his loneliness, but she sank that consideration too—it was too dangerous. It had served, however, to give her an antithetical thought concerning her actual mode of life, and thinking of its luxury she was bound to contrast it with her condition of two months ago. She saw it as a self-centred life. It was natural to look for excuses, and she found them in the old arguments of poverty, ambition and the inconsideration of Euean. If only he had been tolerant, she was sure she would have been satisfied to wait for his success. Thus by the gymnastics of sophistry she endeavoured to exculpate herself, to plead extenuating circumstances as a palliation, juggling as though blindfolded. Pleading her cause to herself she had arguments, too, for the justification of her present existence. Circumstances had led her naturally to this life of luxury, which one had the right to enjoy if one could afford it. She had everything she wanted here, the things to make her happy, and it must be her own fault if she could not distil happiness from their possession. No, she could not return to Euean.

Thus excusing herself she fell into a superficial sleep, starting up on hearing the creak of a footstep at her door. It was George listening to discover if she slept, a custom of his when she had gone to bed before him. She gave no sign of her wakefulness, and presently she heard him move away and shut the door of his own room.

XXXVI

IN these days she studied her face with melancholy interest. She was still twenty-seven under the electric light; morning added another ten years. She forced herself to smile before the glass, and the painful unreality of the action, and the horror with which she observed shadowy lines, which her present condition of mind magnified to furrows, reminded her of a saying of Admiral Sheepshanks: "A toothless mouth has no right to be merry: it makes others cease to laugh"; and she turned away with a shudder.

Omar is not the only philosopher who, in a vain attempt to catch a glimpse of To-morrow, has had to fall back on To-day. Thus Charity in long broodings on the maze of the path that lay before her came to realise that the prophylactic of dejection lay in present bustle, and finding that it was hateful to recognise conscience she banished thought back to the mists. She told herself that Society was both her instinct and her ambition; she had gifts, and in their conjoining she would receive the forgetfulness she sought.

The immediate results of her resolution were not satisfactory. She gained acquaintances that promised to be friends, but probationary days were trying to her spirit, and moods of forced hilarity were followed by fits of collapse. She discovered that it was her feelings, not her circumstances, that made the drama of her life, and the malady of memory was a sore thing to combat. George's political work in the borough left her with more leisure than she desired, but when he could afford time for her company he was a miser of minutes, taking pleasure in the fancied pleasure he gave her in a minute recital of the events of the day. On these occasions she was clever to conceal her heart, and if she thought herself the most miserable of women she had some satisfaction in knowing how to disguise the fact, and she met all his attentions with every appearance of gratification.

Being considered of Society she had to pay its price. Visits had to be received and paid. Circumstances and a certain determination helped in keeping memory in the background. Ambition had rushed forward to welcome riches, and she set

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about enjoying the feast of sense. She had decided that it would be an impossible thing for her to renounce both love and pleasure ; and endeavouring to give her heart a substitute for the love it demanded she lived all absorbed in the luxury of her position, troubling no more about money matters than the wife of a millionaire. Danaë to the shower of gold, she found existence a continuation of luxurious moments. This life of movement and worldly pleasure had become necessary to her ; and George's pleasure was in bestowing the things she appreciated so well.

Thus she began to make herself believe that she was living in perpetual purple ; the curtain of a new life was rising to reveal glittering scenes, and she stood in the midst, raised to a splendid view of the world.

If at times she had misery in the thought that she was incapable of love for George, she was proud of him, and she read the newspapers containing his name with enthusiastic pleasure. She still told herself that the future of her love depended on him, and, by her actions, she gave him no cause to believe that his confidence in ultimately gaining his desire had cause for disturbance. In the presence of friends and domestics they were happy husband and wife. If personal will could have taken her to the clouds she would have soared ; it was her tragedy to realise that she still remained on earth.

Neither she nor George ever mentioned Euean now. The remembrance of him was their skeleton in the cupboard, and they both passed by it in silence, knowing it there and daring not to tell each other of their knowledge. The dare-devil excitement of Charity's life came to be the insulator against a persistence of this trouble. It is not easy to be altogether unhappy when one can dress in fine raiment and be drawn along the most fashionable highways by splendid horses in the handsomest victoria in the town ; when one can claim the privilege of exchanging bows with Titles, sit at a table loaded with plate, handle one's own cheque-book, and look forward to honours in the near future. Thus semi-happy hours did not fail her.

Time won her friends. There were those who liked her, who were gained by her charm of manner, by her beauty and position, who were even attracted by, though not confessing endorsement of, her opinions on questions dangerous and delicate to unknot. A woman at war with the world—even a woman at bay—does not lack admirers, she may even enlist supporters and enthusiasts in her cause. Honest

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conviction carries its full weight, and one declaring courage of personal opinions is never altogether friendless or unadmired. Charity thus secured adherents who might be considered friends until the test came which would prove whether or not they were worthy of the claim.

A reception at the house of Mrs Carrington was an event to stir the pulses of her womanhood. It raised her above the low level of depression, acting as a tonic to her blood. Having decided that it was rightful for her to have the experiences of "Society," to show herself to the world, to satisfy her desire of admiration, and, like Æneas at Carthage, to have the opportunity of applauding brilliant scenes, she experienced such satisfaction in preparation for, and anticipation of the event that she was persuaded that memory of the past was at length overwhelmed.

Charity entered the room walking processionally and wearing an easy grace of manner as naturally as a ceremonial cloak. She found that almost all the guests were strangers to her, and, unnecessarily, wondered if she would have any difficulty in obtaining introductions. Within the first half-hour she had recognised among the ladies four or five old customers of Mason Brothers, and she began to experience a dread that a recognition of her might lead to discomposure. She strove to comfort herself with the thought that the chances of this were remote: it was nearly four years since she had severed her connection with the firm of drapers. Absolute relief came on her introduction to two of these ladies, who received her with cordial sociality, thus proving to her satisfaction that she was unrecognised, and, her mind at rest on the point, her natural ease of manner returned automatically.

She allowed herself the exhilaration of observing the movements of the well-dressed crowd, its cheerful hum, the women's dress and jewellery; the lights and floral decorations, and in apprising these common trivialities she experienced physical thrills of pure enjoyment. George took her from group to group, introducing her with evident pride. She became animated, was listened to with interest and smiles; and it gratified her to see that her reception gave George unalloyed pleasure. Men came to him and begged to be introduced to his wife; the women were conquered by her bearing. Her personality seemed to pervade the whole room, and the social success she had wished for was her own at last.

The powdered footman, still announcing guests, introduced to the notice of the assembly an old gentleman accompanied

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by a lady much younger than himself. In recognising the latter Charity failed to hear her name, but she knew her as Louisa Viney, of her own village. So a mischance, such as she had feared, was about to occur. She looked round to see if George were near, as if his close presence might be her protection. He was talking with Mr Armitage, one of the late members for the borough. She drew back among the crowd to subdue the hot flood that she felt in her face. The process gave her opportunity for reflection, and she was hardly conscious of the remarks addressed to her by her neighbours in the crowd. Probably she was absurd to have fears. The two women had not met for so long that it was possible that Louisa Viney might fail to recognise her. While she was speculating in this fashion Lady Bindon approached :

"Oh! there you are, Mrs Graham! I want you to tell me where I may find your husband. Such news! The Radicals have lost two more Midland seats; Mr Carrington has just received a telegram. You must give me the pleasure of telling your husband myself. Where is he? You don't seem a bit jubilant!"

"I get politics every day, so I can afford to allow you the pleasure of giving the news to George. I saw him a moment ago talking to Mr Armitage."

"Come and watch Mr Armitage's face."

"No thank you. I dislike witnessing other people's chagrin. By the way, can you tell me the name of the lady and gentleman talking to Lord Farringham?"

"Mr and Mrs Addingham Jenner. They have been married about three months only—London people, though she originally came from somewhere in the country. It was a most absurd infatuation. He bears the reputation of being a social Don Quixote, and has been married twice already. Though her age is beyond polite questioning she is young enough to be his daughter. Fred Sanderson took her for such when he met at her Mrs Wilson's last week, and persisted in calling her *Miss Jenner*. I was told she was as mad as furies, and she positively held her wedding-ring under his nose until he saw his mistake and apologised. I'd have given anything to have seen it. Mrs Wilson related the incident to me herself."

"I can sympathise with her. It is to be hoped that she has married well."

"No doubt, my dear. Plenty of money, and a fine house in town. She took what remained of her good looks to market and got well paid for them, I've not the least doubt. Her

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husband is the most unmitigated Radical in Brighton—stands at nothing to secure a political advantage. That's why he's no real friend of mine. But I *must* see your husband. There he is! I'll return in a minute."

Charity had regarded the marriage of either of the Viney girls as hopeless, and in speaking of her sympathy to Lady Bindon she but gave words to a feeling of genuine kindness on account of the woman who, she felt sure, had married an old man out of sheer desperation. From her seat under the palms she watched Lady Bindon in conversation with George. Her volatile ladyship was evidently obtaining the utmost gratification from imparting her news: her merry laugh went bounding through the room, and Charity watched her move from group to group until she came to Mrs Addingham Jenner who, for the moment, was sitting alone. She fancied that the latter glanced towards her while Lady Bindon was talking. The next moment her attention was diverted from that lady by observing George coming towards her. He was in high spirits, fully conscious of the favourable impression Charity had made, and bent upon adding to her conquests. She accepted his proposal that she should walk down the room with him with a smile, and together they threaded the throng.

As they were about to pass Mrs Addingham Jenner, Charity was surprised to see that lady catch George's eye and bow. To her horror he immediately stopped, gently checking her walk to capture her attention. His juvenile eagerness to introduce her to everybody in Brighton society was about to involve her in a predicament which all her resolution was required to face.

"Let me introduce you to Mrs Addingham Jenner, dear, the wife of an old acquaintance.—Ah, Mrs Addingham Jenner, this is indeed a pleasure! I would very much like you to know my wife."

The two ladies bowed, each with a constraint that was not unobserved by the other. George continued to run on pleasantries:

"I must warn you, dear, that Mrs Addingham Jenner is of the enemy's camp, so you will have to guard our political secrets."

"You have evidently recognised the weakness of your political position, Mr Graham, and have been wise to take a wife to assist you in the canvass."

Charity took the reply upon herself:

"I assure you my husband has gained nothing politically

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in taking that step. I don't canvass ; and there are positively times when I feel that I am a clog on the wheel by claiming the personal attention he should give to the cause."

Charity was quick to observe that the advantage of the present meeting was with Mrs Addingham Jenner, and her thought was that that lady wished to impress this upon her. George, imagining that he had been the means of establishing a friendly intimacy between the two ladies, in spite of Charity's unobtrusive efforts to retain his presence, left them together while he pursued a hoped-for supporter with the tact of the political aspirant.

In spite of outward calm Charity thus found herself in an invidious position. She was about to decide upon a show of extreme friendliness to Mrs Addingham Jenner when that lady spoke :

"Have I not met you before somewhere, Mrs Graham ? I am afraid that my memory is not so good as it might be."

How much of this attitude was assumed was a question that Charity had to decide instantly. She remembered their antagonism of former years, and decided upon a bold action as the safest course.

"We both come from Halnaker."

"So we do!—I remember. You were a Miss Wood—Woodhead, were you not ?"

Charity flushed with vexation. She would have liked to have slapped the woman's face. She drew herself up, braced to face the show of antagonism :

"No, I was not ! My family name is Woodhams."

"A thousand pardons ! Of course I remember ! You left your home some time ago to—to——"

"To go into a business house ! You have a good memory, after all, Mrs Addingham Jenner."

"Indeed, you surprise me ! I thought you left home to be married. Excuse me, I think I see my husband looking for me."

Mrs Addingham Jenner floated down the room, leaving Charity with fire-tipped ears and the most violent hatred she had ever experienced for a member of her own sex, her self-possession crushed in the moment of her realised aspirations. No mortification is so severe and complete as that which comes in the hour of long hoped for triumph, and at this moment Charity was feeling its supreme bitterness. Her very boldness had been her undoing, and in a mood for viewing the worst

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she concluded that Mrs Addingham Jenner was only too well acquainted with her personal history of the past few years. It was difficult to think that Mrs Jenner's conduct was due to mere snobbishness, and she began to wonder if at any time she had given her cause for her present action. Seeking a reason she suddenly remembered a scene of the past, in Masons' shop, when she had defeated Miss Viney's attempt to abash her, and, writhing still, she blamed herself for her impetuous tactics in the present incident. That, following George's action in introducing her to Mrs Addingham Jenner, would probably mean her social ruin, and, she felt, that of George as well. In an agony of thought she was for seeking George and asking him to take her away from what had become a hateful scene. They must talk it out and decide upon what was best to be done. Then she reflected how unkind it would be to add to his anxieties at a time when he had so much to occupy his attention. She would wait for the development of events; and she began to hope that her anticipations were foolishly precipitate, and from hope she took the shadow of comfort.

At this moment she observed Mrs Addingham Jenner hold Lady Bindon in conversation, and a flash of thought gave her an additional reason for the snub. Lady Bindon had the reputation of being the most delightful tattler in Brighton society, and Charity surmised that her innocent expression of sympathy had been conveyed to Mrs Addingham Jenner by means of her ladyship's over-zealous tongue, and that, under the remembrance of Charity's own old reproof at Masons' the former had naturally misconstrued her meaning. In her desire to forget the incident she promptly determined to treat it with contempt, though had she overheard a conversation that was at that moment taking place between Mrs Jenner and her hostess, Mrs Carrington, who had now taken Lady Bindon's place, she would probably not have found herself able to make so prompt a decision of insulation:

"Have you known Mrs Graham long, Mrs Carrington?"

"A short time only. She was married quite recently. A brilliant woman, with ideas of her own. She is an ideal wife for a Member of Parliament."

"Do you know where she comes from?"

"No; but I believe her maiden name was Woodhams, and I am given to understand that her ancestors held a very high position in the country. I think that one of them has a prominent place in Horsfield's 'History of Sussex,' though I

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have never read that book myself. I hate histories; they always remind me of my schooldays."

A meaning ejaculation came from Mrs Addingham Jenner's lips:

"Oh!"

"You infer something? I'm quite curious."

"She comes from Halnaker, my home. I was told by her mother, who is the wife of a small farmer, that she had married a Mr Strachan, a journalist, or literary man. Now I find her the wife of Mr Graham."

"There is evidently a mistake. Perhaps she was engaged to the journalist and the match broken off."

"It is quite possible that I have made a mistake. Miss Woodhams left her home four or five years ago. I understand that her marriage took place in London—a quiet affair, was it not?"

"Yes; family reasons, I believe."

"I thought I'd scented a romance. It is curious that such a mistake should have occurred. Please don't say anything. I suppose Mr Graham has a good chance of winning the election?"

The subject of conversation veered a point; and Mrs Addingham Jenner inwardly determined to seek for further information in the mystery surrounding her rival's marriage, for her own gratification.

XXXVII

CHARITY still played a part, and played it well. There were times when George endeavoured with his love to strike a spark upon her heart, but it was always without securing an increasing flame. She sometimes fancied that love for him flared up, but before she could be certain it had sunk again to flickering uncertainty. In his presence she was nearly always bright and agreeable, sometimes even over-demonstrative in showing an affection that, to herself, she acknowledged was obviously fitful. Her intimate position was that of a wife who is merely wedded, not married; and though she acted well her art lacked the naturalness of real passion.

That was the painful fact: she was passionless. She could not anchor her thoughts to this man who was so kind to her, and who was so pathetically patient in waiting for the love he was hoping to win. Try as she would to keep her thoughts there they flowed off on a powerfully persuasive current to the Once, when she had dwelt surrounded by the love of the man she had failed to appreciate fully and bear with. She had thought to invade and capture a realm of rich delights, and she had discovered the gems in the Valley of Diamonds to be only jewels of paste; and now she carried a mental burden more difficult to bear than any Old Man of the Sea. She had surrendered love for luxury, happiness for the attainment of ambition, old lamps for new; and in this sort of consideration she exhausted reflection and sank back to the desert level of misery.

Daily, and often at night, she argued her case with her own conscience. She was called Mrs Graham, and was thought to be living a calm, peaceful life with that name's counterpart; and yet, in reality, she was a woman living as much alone as if she dwelt in a subterranean recess. Suffering did not bring her to think that she had done real palpable wrong in assuming a supposed legalised sexual relationship with George Graham. It was harder to vindicate nature than honour, and it was cruel that she should have been led to

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oppose those organised institutions which she had set out with willingness to adopt. Thus she generalised, and, by her own logic, was convinced of the justification of her conduct. On particular points she was not so mentally comfortable. The desertion of a man beloved for one to whom she had not given her heart, even though she considered that supremest provocation had warranted the act, was a thing to which she had not become reconciled. The law would have protected a married woman so shamefully used by her husband, but it had penalties for the woman who took another man in that husband's place. Her self-defence on this point was not so easy a matter, and though she argued to herself speciously, her eloquence did not bear the ring of conviction. Driven to distress she searched the murky horizon for the help of that love for the man with whom she lived, whose coming, she hoped, would strengthen the justification of the means she had taken to her end.

She had now nothing but excitement to trust to for a drowning of such thoughts. George was adopted and nominated, the day of election came near, and incidents were plentiful. Now he was engaged in preparing to address the electors at a final rally before going to the poll. The meeting was to be great, with supporting speeches from a baronet, men of local influence, and Admiral Sheepshanks, new from his own re-election to Parliament.

Then came a report, sudden, like a crack in a sheet of ice. The hundred-tongued question arose: Were she and George Graham married? Enemies were at work, gossip raged, and they saw their names posted up before the world. The woman shrank at the echo of the first shout, and turning her eyes saw the man's mouth smiling upon her. What a magnificent love was his! She returned his smile, and set her lips to meet the world in a grapple.

She asked herself who had whispered to the gossips, and she thought of Euean taking a terrible revenge. In a moment she decided that he was not capable of that. George asked for a sign of her courage:

"You are brave, dearest?"

"Yes, George; I dare face a mob. Barking dogs are not to be feared. If necessary we shall fight together and win."

"And if we lose? Ruin is a terrible thing to face."

"We can pay. Ruin will not come, the election is in two days."

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He watched her face, and saw it spring from cloud. Excitement chased dark thoughts, like clouds driven across a sky. She was relieved of the mass of them, her face shone, and she felt ready for a spring to grip a possible calamity. He saw the signs of her courage, and thought it due to her trust in him.

Though outwardly clad in armour he had an inward dread of the unforeseen forces that he felt were accumulating against them, and he endeavoured to peer into the darkened foreground with eyes that were painfully haunted. The Sea Dog saw, and accounted for it in his own way :

"A few more hours at the guns, my boy, then the decoration of the victor ! You are nervous. So have some of your best commanders been on the eve of victory. Pshaw ! The fit will pass off in the grand attack. I have bristling points for the meeting—unanswerable naval statistics for missiles. Sir William will deal mainly with the Emigration Bill. Beyond your navy commit yourself to nothing more than you are bound. Your election will be won to-morrow night."

The Admiral was back at "Downlands" on the following morning before George was ready to leave the house. He was fussily excited :

"Vincent says that there are ugly reports about, George, concerning you and your wife. He wants me to persuade you to see your solicitor."

George caught a breath :

"Vincent would better exhibit the wisdom of a political agent at such an hour as this by spending his time in looking after the voters instead of listening to insinuations against my personal character."

"I agree with you, but you know what the public is ; they don't stop to inquire, and attacks on a candidate's personal character have done him damage among the electorate before to-day. These d——d Radicals are like North American savages for stabbing in the dark. I think you would be wise to see your solicitor."

"It would be more dignified to ignore these people."

"This is no time for the consideration of ethics ! A lie gets half round the town while truth is reaching for its hat, and harassing tactics should be crushed by superior force. Your navy needs you in the House, and we must use all our strength to get you there."

"It's an immoral public that will allow a man's private

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character to stand in the way of his public service. I have always lived an honourable man, and if the borough cannot recognise it now I am no fit person to represent it."

"This kind of talk is sheer nonsense! Come with me to your solicitor, or you may wish you had after the poll."

"I decline to insult Charity by taking such a course."

The Sea Dog fretted:

"There can be no insult to her when the thing is untrue. You won't let your wife stand in your way of serving the country. She would not wish that. I had fears, but she promised me not to stand in your way."

"If it comes to a choice between my country and her, I choose her."

"This after my preachings! I tell you that women and politics mix like oil and water—not at all! I have warned you often enough, and now you talk more like a moon-sick lover than a sane man. Let me see your wife. I shall have her with me, or she's no Englishwoman."

"You may compare me with what you will, my friend. I know you. No, I wish you not to see her. This is no thing to trouble a woman with."

"You hee-haw like a jackass now."

"Fire away, old friend!"

"I ask you to come with me. You and I are to stand for your navy; it has been my prayer. You make me doubt your sanity."

"If I get in, we stand together, Admiral; if I don't, we still stand together, I hope."

"Am I not your friend?"

"True. And therefore I ask my old friend to help me to ignore attacks on my personal character."

Further argument was useless. The Admiral strung a Parthian arrow, and left:

"You're more obstinate than a mule, George; you're like a woman for that!"

Charity had expressed a wish to attend the meeting, but George, with clamouring fears, now had dread of her facing a possibly insulting mob. He sought to persuade her to remain behind:

"I think you had better not go, dearest."

"My place is by you, George; and, besides, I have not yet heard you speak. I want to feel proud of you."

"You may have to feel shame for me. Things look black. We shall have the opposition to contend with. I think I

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should do better if you remained at home. I will tell you everything when we come back, of course."

"I should not be happy to stay. No, I much prefer to go with you. Let the world see that we can stand or fall together."

"I'd rather feel that you were safe here. There may be insults: that is the political opponent's definition of fun. It would pain me to know that you heard them."

"I go, George, dear; I am determination personified! Place me in an obscure corner, if you will. I prefer the front of the platform. You know I have courage. Let me show it to these people."

Dinner was at an early hour, the Baronet and Admiral Sheepshanks being guests. Charity could see that George was nervous, and she forced an excellently contrived gaiety, to which the Admiral gallantly responded in breezy sentences, and even the heavy face of the Baronet was seen to break its formal dignity in smiles. On the conclusion of the meal, while the gentlemen were making preparations for departure, Charity sought a minute of George's company, garlanded his neck with her arms, and kissed his forehead:

"We win to-night, dear."

At this moment she appeared to him so beautiful that his love-filled heart leapt up to look at her. His answer had the tone of courage:

"We are prepared to hear if our sentence is to leave this Eden, sweetheart. To-night will tell us how to-morrow's poll will go. I am prepared for anything."

"We are both prepared, dear."

The carriage came for them half-an-hour before the time of the meeting. Charity, exquisitely dressed to her figure and colour, was pale as white roses. She maintained the spirit of the dinner conversation with hectic gaiety until the Dome was in view, and she was urged, by sight of it, to an artificial rapidity of talk. A crowd was outside, and a thin cheer was raised as the carriage drew up at the entrance. There were sentences by detached voices which she failed to translate. She became suddenly silent, and drew a deep breath for courage as she walked into the building with Sir William Haffenden.

Admiral Sheepshanks had determined to enter a possible fray with an intention of fighting the ship to the last plank. He had the speech of first attack, with figures and anecdotes to point it. He relied upon himself to win the ardour of

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the meeting by firing its patriotism. "A plain talk on your navy," he had said to George, "will warm their blood to you. Sir William follows on the Emigration Bill—he declines to speak before me. Pity he cannot bring his sentences to flow! You follow, and rap in both—your navy first. You'll win on that. Your Briton is patriotic before anything. They'll howl like dogs before we've done with 'em. My point is to show what has been left undone by Radical Governments; for the reverse I show 'em what their navy owes to the Tory Party—though it has only been saved from going to the deuce by the Admiralty's Naval Lords. I shall have difficulty in making my speech short."

The men shook hands with platform supporters during the thunder of greeting applause. Unintelligible cries proved that the opposition was present in palpable strength. Charity's eyes crept to George's face and found it pale. He came to her side and placed her on a chair in the platform's second row, where she sat flanked by Primrose ladies. He took his own seat on the left of the chairman, and began a study of the mass of faces before him. Fearing the effect of a militant opposition's signs of heckling on the temper of a candidate, half-trained to face the howlings of mobs, Admiral Sheepshanks bent forward to George, speaking in a church whisper for encouragement:

"Gadflies, my boy! but I'm thick-skinned: they'll waste their stings!"

The chairman's brief opening remarks were listened to with quiet attention; the Admiral alone fretted. On the Sea Dog's standing up he was greeted with a full-throated blast of delight: his bow-wow-wow was known of old. When the storm of cheering had subsided he asked for the singing of "Rule, Britannia!" each man to give it voice like the British lion he was. Then he set sail, getting a flickering laugh at the start. It was his way to begin a speech with an anecdote; he knew the weakness of the British political audience.

Here was a man of oaken timbers!—a preposterous person of diminutive stature, tickling the comic in one when he warmed up and shouted like a farmer in a twenty-acre field. He was off at a gallop, like a spirited horse, expelling sentences and figures as round shot, ridiculing the Radical opposition and pointing them out to laughter for having deposited their wits in the moon. He had his criticism for "landlubber lords of the Admiralty," who were "nothing more than ambitious civilians who would do well to imbibe more of the

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naval spirit"; and a wag in the crowd was quick to pounce upon the point:

"Rum!"

There was a salvo of laughter, pleasant to the ears of the hero of political campaigns. He wanted this humour for his boy, and he strove to intensify it, rising to the superlative in sentences aflame with the Greek fire of sarcasm to shrivel the Radical Party. England must always be in a position to attack: that was being prepared for war. Their opponents were the party with votes to give for reduced armaments: throw away the sword and keep the scabbard was the Radical system for preserving universal peace. They were not fit to deal with questions of navy and army, such as they were only fit to feed sharks. If his hearers were satisfied with that state of things they were not patriotic Englishmen, but born noodles. Their candidate—he was proud to mention it—was not satisfied; he was pledged to vote for the increase of the navy that, in the unification of the British Empire, formed the strong steel links that connected their colonies with the Motherland.

Twenty minutes by George Graham's watch served the Admiral, and the Baronet was introduced to a second thundering. Admiral Sheepshanks resumed his seat, and pulled a gun-metal chronometer from his pocket to show it to Graham, as to say that he could speak within the bounds of reasonable time when necessity demanded it. Sir William was fumbling with his notes. There was another cheer.

His sonorous cathedral utterances, at even pace, drew signs of weariness from the audience to the time he told his single story: an illustrative tale from the *Gesta Romanorum*. The audience chirped at the relief, and the baronet made a halt to drink water. Admiral Sheepshanks whispered to George:

"Would it be polite to remind him of the necessity for being economical with time? The meeting is fretting. These fools grow noisy!—like women who give us noise without sense. You'll have to start well to have them with you."

The Baronet took up his threads, and George was conscious of his own restiveness when at last the speech came to an end. He turned to smile at Charity before rising from his chair. He received her smile in return, and stepped to the front of the platform.

Cheers and the opposition's cries were his greeting. The medley was so long continued that the chairman half rose

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and held up his hand for silence. Charity saw that George's face was slightly flushed. He started bravely.

His points were straight, he gave shoulder blows with doubled fist, and each was notched by an approving nod of the Admiral's head. The Sea Dog turned to Charity, smiling proudly. His lad was flowing beautifully, in splendid folds of eloquence. Someone called a question. The speaker answered as if he had expected it. Then came another and a third, and both were satisfied. Then he endeavoured to hark back to the relaxed thread of his speech. He could not find it, it was a knot. His momentary confusion was the turn of the opposition :

"What has your party done for the working classes ?"

"I'll tell you, my friend"; and he was proceeding when another voice travelled to his ears :

"We've had nothing from the Tories. What they've given we've had to pay for ! Who ever heard of Tory charity ?"

"Their charity begins at home !"

"And covers a multitude of sins !"

"Aye, charity ! How's Charity ?"

There was coarse laughter from those among the enemy who knew to whom the name referred. A twisted smile, that hinted internal pain, passed across Charity's face. Within she felt her heart fall, but she sat pale and rigid. Admiral Sheepshanks instinctively squared his chair to hide her from the view of the audience. George had hopelessly lost the point of his speech ; his tongue stumbled among words, his brow wrinkled, he floundered, placed a hand in his pocket, as if for notes, and turned to Admiral Sheepshanks.

"Go on, my boy !—go on !"

"I cannot."

"You must ! You spoke of the loss in trade—here are the figures. Or try another tack. Compare that with the naval expenditure. You can revert."

The meeting was shouting, the Baronet blew his nose with fog-horn sonorousness, and as he turned to face the audience again George saw a smile on Sir William's leonine face. Ridiculously he began to wonder if the baronet knew the meaning of what had been called. He started again, and found himself stammering. He had no concentration. Derisive laughter came to his ears, his voice refused him, and he began to wonder how Charity was taking things. Sweat was on his forehead.

"Sit down ! Sit down !"

His brow ridged with anger, and his answer was shouted :

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" I'll be heard ! "

" Sit down ! No charity for Tories ! "

The meeting volleyed laughter. Admiral Sheepshanks, worked up to a grey squall of passion, sprang to his feet. George turned wonderingly, hesitated, then walked from the platform to the shelter of the room at the back. The uproar came to him, and he sat down on a table and shut it from his ears with his hands. A minute passed, then he was aware of the closing of the door, and, freeing his ears, he heard the rustle of a skirt. Charity had come to him. She took his hand, and he saw that her face was wet with tears.

XXXVIII

CHARITY and George drove home from the meeting together in a hired cab. Each was too full of feeling to exchange more than a few words in low tones. Their desire was to be alone—to get away from the crowd and the noise of the streets, and once only when George gently took her hand in his was she able to rouse herself from the half-waking dream of her thoughts.

A letter awaited her on her boudoir table, redirected by Euean's hand, from Pevensey. She saw that it was from her mother, and she opened it without feeling any interest to know its contents. But her mechanical gaze upon the written page became suddenly alive, and she felt herself paling. The letter told her that her mother had received report of her desertion of Euean, that it had reached her through successive mouths, and that it had entered the village by the agency of Mrs Addingham Jenner. The mother declared herself unwilling to believe that her girl had left "her lawful husband to live with another man," but she could not understand why Euean's name had been omitted from her daughter's recent letters, nor why her last letter had been posted from Brighton. Had she and Euean moved there? She was frightened, and begged to have her mind put at ease. If the thing that she prayed might not be true was an actuality she could accept no money that was tainted with her girl's sin. She had kept the story to herself, daily dreading that it might reach the father's ears, and she hoped that her girl would immediately give the lie to what she was pained to tell her.

When one is struck to earth an extra blow matters little. Charity handed the sheet of notepaper to George. He read it through quietly, then placed it on the table:

"My poor girl!"

Pity from him, who alone was deserving of pity, was more than she could bear. She burst into passionate sobbing, her frame shaking with convulsive hiccups of grief. He sought to comfort her:

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"Our pride has received a sad hurt, old girl, but not our self-respect. We have been levelled to-night, but we do not rank with the vile. Our fall is not ruin—it is a glorious one so long as it binds us closer together. I'd forego all else to know that."

The bitterness of her helpless woe defied such consolation at this. For them something more stupendous had happened than if the hills had danced to witness their downfall. She had stepped forth to meet the world in a grapple, to find herself heavily thrown, and now she stood in the exposed position of a beautiful woman on whom the cutting winds of doubt had blown. Her pain was on account of the compulsion that forced George to stand by her side, undeservedly condemned to help her in bearing the burden of ignominy. Cut off from the straight-living, law-abiding world, no wonder the sun was extinguished when at the height of its noonday blaze, no wonder she viewed her misery as a thing without end.

And clangouring amid the chaos of thought was the voice of conscience calling upon her to make reparation to the man she had caused to suffer. Her heart, convulsively opening to take in love, must be satisfied to accept honour in the place of marital affection. Now, more than ever before, was she bound to George; on that point she was certain. As to love for him that, too, must not be delayed. If only she could forget the past! She scarce dared stir the sleeping cinders of that memory, and she was thankful when George caused a diversion of her thoughts:

"Who do you think is at the bottom of to-night's scene?"

"I cannot say for certain. You saw what mother said in her letter about Mrs Addingham Jenner."

"But Mrs Addingham Jenner cannot have blown with her foul breath here!"

"As a matter of revenge, yes. Besides her husband is a militant member of the Radical Party, and he has the reputation of allowing nothing to stand in the way of the end he has in view. His wife was never a friend of mine. I suspect that she felt that she had to satisfy a grudge against me for certain feminine advantages I have had of her. A woman encompassing a revenge on her kind has no mercy. When I suspected her of this a few days ago I felt intense hatred for her. Now I am beyond that."

In his present state George Graham felt that to learn that he was victor in the election would give him no elation. He was occupied with the thought of how he might guard Charity

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from the scorplings of scandal, and the hope to end her martyrdom in a haven of peace.

He went with Admiral Sheepshanks to the counting of the votes. When the returning officer announced the election of Mr Armitage by fifty-six votes George turned to his friend with a smile :

" I have polled well, Admiral. My pain is only due to the fact that you will feel the defeat more than I."

The Admiral's eyes glittered like bits of mica :

" I am hit, George—so is your navy. Well, I've warned these dogs, who think themselves the only Solomon God has made. If they won't hear the hiss of the serpent they must be stung. I'll never again bring a blooming baronet to address 'em—pearls and swine! Armitage has gone out to crow to the crowd. Bah! it is the man they think of, not his political principles. You must follow him and thank your supporters. Call for a cheer for your navy; that will serve to remind 'em how they've neglected their duty."

Graham made his ordeal brief, though, as he spoke, he was aware of unmannerly stifled laughs that rose here and there like the fizzle of a damp cracker.

To Admiral Sheepshanks, on their return to " Downlands," he gave a bitter expression of his thoughts :

" Henceforward I live apart from the world—I go away. The country that would weigh a man's private life—not knowing the circumstances under which it is lived—against his public services, is no country of mine. My friends seem to have turned from me already. Cartwright gave me his back an hour ago, and Walters ran off to speak to someone else when I shook his hand. Such men were never friends of mine. I have soiled my hand in grasping theirs. I wish them good—I would not harm them if I could. It is the way of the political candidate to prattle meaningless sentences to those who seek him, and whose help he seeks. I have done so, and I thank Heaven that they were not meant, for otherwise I should have outraged my heart. I shall sell this house and go away to be forgotten. I ask for nothing better."

George observed with pain that his old friend seemed to have added perceptible age during recent hours. Now the Sea Dog looked at him with eyes full of the stern love that comes to men who have had intimacies deeper than those of brothers, who know each other through and through, who can criticise with brutal sincerity and know that instead of breeding animosity such criticism makes friendship deeper

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and more lasting. There was a suspicious glitter in the elder man's eyes as he took George by the hand :

" Pull round, my boy ! Pessimism does not suit you ; it will pass. I know how you feel, but you are young—we are both young for that matter. If the Radicals come to office their government can't last. There is not a man among 'em who can formulate a programme that will satisfy the country. Let 'em wag their paws ; I give 'em three years at most. Then will be your chance. I'll live to see you stand by me in the House yet. In the meantime you must be married—you are in honour bound to do that. This thing will die out—it cannot altogether account for your defeat. Stare the people down ; or go away for a few months while it dies. The public memory is short, and if you nurse the constituency carefully and spend your money wisely you'll develop supporters sufficient to turn the Radical majority into a crushing defeat when the time comes. I like your girl—she challenges my esteem. I don't pry into your reasons for not having married her ; but she's the right stuff. Marry her to-morrow, and leave the town for six months."

" Thank you, dear friend ; but I have made my first and last effort. I have retired from public life for ever."

" Nonsense, I say ! When one has made the last effort it is always possible to make one effort more. I give my advice—it is the only thing that men give with real generosity."

" I know your generosity better than that, Admiral ; you are all that a true friend could be. But as for politics, my future connection with them will not go beyond my vote. Society has refused me, therefore I owe it nothing, and to bid for its favours again would be to lose my self-respect."

" More pessimism ! My dear boy, listen to me. We live in a world that, whatever it really may be, professes a holy morality—in other words we kow-tow to forms and customs. You have an idea of morality that does not coincide with that of your neighbour, and you put that idea into practice by living with a charming woman to whom you are not married. That may be all right in the abstract—I daresay you have had your own reasons for not marrying, and, bear in mind, I don't pry for 'em. Unfortunately for your method you have previously chosen to follow a public career, and finding that your own ideas of morality are likely to clash with those to whom you look to forward your interests, you give out that you are married to the woman with whom you live. On this point you even deceive your most intimate friends, but,

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personally, I take no offence on that account, as I have no doubt that you have had grounds for not admitting them to the secret. Well, your experiment—for which, by the way, you cannot claim to be a precursor—is found out, and for a time, at anyrate—though, as I said before, I cannot think it is altogether on that account, if at all—your public career receives a rude check. Your real sin lies in arranging matters so badly that they have been found out. It is not the mere sense of doing what is generally regarded as wrong that makes one feel guilty: the feeling of guilt comes only at the prospect of dishonour on being discovered. The world has hot words and cold looks for those who sin against the conventions, but, thank God! it can overlook when reparation is made. We may all have our ideas on the question of marriage—I know I have!—but, after all, marriage is a bond that has made much of the world's happiness. You know my views concerning the impediments a wife offers to the public man, but your Charity is as much your wife as if you had both sought the blessing of Holy Church on your union, and I would not urge you to shake her off in order that you might pursue a public career unfettered, even if you thought of it. Forsake these Averni, old George! You are a splendid fellow; and you're going to do the honourable thing to Charity and marry her."

Marry her! How he burned to tell the dear friend that lashed him so undeservedly that to marry her was the greatest desire of his life, that it was more to him than the public success which had just escaped him, that her love was more than life itself. And now his love for her was compelling his silence, and he must suffer to keep her from suspicion. It took all his strength to bind the tumult of feeling within him, and he could only grip his friend's hand to convey his thanks for that friend's good intentions, while the muscles of his face worked, and emotion dared not let him speak.

"You'll think over what I've said, Mate George. I know you will. Don't talk now—wait till I come again. I'm off for a few days' holiday—sermonising is not good for my health. I believe I've hit myself more than I've hit you. Forgive me, and, and—give her my love. Good-bye."

He was gone, and George Graham sank to a chair to calm his emotion and think. For half-an-hour he remained thinking alone, and then he heard a movement at the door, and Charity entered the library:

"I've seen the paper. My poor, dear George!"

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He knew by this that he was spared the pain of telling her of his defeat, and he was thankful for it. He lifted his face and smiled sadly :

"It is better than losing you, dearest."

So he would not speak one word of reprobation to her for what she thought might have been prevented had she only married him as he had wished. It was a painful thing to realise this, and she felt that a torrent of reproaches would be easier to bear than the redoubled kindness and devotion that he now poured upon her. He spoke of their love, and she thought that she almost hated him for coupling her name with his in a way she had so little earned. Never had she been so sensible of so wide a separation from him than at this hour when he imagined they were never closer together.

They sat amid the débris of their hopes. Ambition, courage and love were bankrupt ; happiness seemed on the verge of insolvency, and the prospect was terribly dreary. Charity shuddered.

"We have defied moral laws, dearest girl ; but what does that matter ? There is only one law for us, and that is love."

"I always wanted to marry honourably, George ; and because I could not, the world turns on me and I must suffer. Oh, the injustice of it ! The hypocrisy of the world makes me sick !"

"You have had courage in the past, dear, and you must not lose heart now. I rely on your courage to keep my own. We will leave Brighton—it will be easier for both of us."

"I don't think I am deficient in courage, George ; but I have hated receiving and visiting people. I have gone to their houses feeling that something might happen to find me unprepared to meet it. I dread the social snub. If I had been forearmed by knowing how much other people knew about me I should have felt that, knowing what I had to combat, I should have been prepared to meet them. It was the uncertainty that I dreaded. To get away from society of that kind is alone worth leaving Brighton for. If I could have had society without the threat of Damocles' sword I believe I should have been happy."

"The chances of discovery would have been greater in the public life had I been elected."

"I knew that and dreaded it. I have no feeling of guilt for the position I have taken, and yet I have the feeling of the criminal ! Pioneers in a cause must expect the everyday martyrdom of petty annoyances, I suppose. But it is a

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wearing martyrdom that is harder to bear than stake and faggot. The world hasn't your point of view from which to see things, and won't take the trouble to find it."

"And the bravery that caused you to swim out and pull me from the sea would have heartened you to bear all this for my sake!"

"That was different;—though I feel that a woman is justified in daring for her principles. Life gives nothing; even happiness has to be paid for. To gain peace one has to appear hostile. I am robbed of my strength for the conflict in knowing that I have made you an undeserved victim with me."

"I love you, and you are gaining in love for me."

"It is I who have been the cause of this, George; I who have ruined your hopes. I have brought no good to anyone. I am afraid you will never forgive me."

"There is no necessity for forgiveness, dearest. I have learnt in the last few hours that my happiness can be only with you."

She winced, almost imperceptibly. He asked a question, as if to assure himself of the truth of his statement:

"Is not that so?"

"We ought to be very happy together, George."

"We will be."

Her face was plainly readable in the dumb eloquence of a woman who was suffering severely. She appeared to be thinking, and suddenly she burst out:

"What have you done to deserve this? Oh, George, George, it is dreadful, dreadful!"

The tensy of her nerves sought relief in a string of dry sobs. It hurt him to see her:

"Never mind, my girl; henceforward the world is against us, but we have strength to face it together. We'll go somewhere—abroad, and be happy. After all there is nothing very great in the greatest walks in life. We still have our love, and that will be our happiness. You love me?"

"Yes, dear."

"More than you love anyone else?"

"I love you only, George."

He looked at her wistfully; then his great love for her made him cry out:

"Oh, Charity, is this true? Why did you not tell me so before?"

She was conscious of a lie as she replied, but the wrong she did him was drowned in the profundity of a great pity. He

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must not suffer the overthrow of his social ambitions without the comfort a woman might give :

" Because I wanted you to see it for yourself, George."

He gave a cry of joy, and advanced to her with his arms outstretched :

" You dear, dear girl ! No, I did not see it. I have been blind. These hateful politics have enwrapped me to the oblivion of all else. I have been afraid of losing you ; something seemed to tell me that you were doing your best to love me, and I have waited—hoping. Kiss me, dear heart."

She offered him half-frozen lips. He was too blind in his happiness to notice how cold they were.

" Do you love me as well as you ever loved any man ?—as well as you loved *him* ? "

" I love you more than any other man, George. The time has come for which you have waited so long. If it is your wish we will be married whenever you will fix the day. I am ready. Let me go now ; I am upset. I shall soon be myself again."

" Oh, Charity, how I love you ! Yes, we will be married at once. I will obtain a licence. I am going to make you a good husband. You shall never regret marrying me."

He kissed her again, smiling joyfully, and bade her go to her room and lie down. She went, moving heavily, locked the door, and flung herself across the bed in a paroxysm of weeping, calling upon the name of the man whose love she had denied, clutching the coverlet and fumbling it in the agony of her emotion :

" Oh, Euean, why did I leave you ! "

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HER early morning thought was to reassure her mother, and she sent a note bidding her calm her fears, admitting her action in living with Euean Strachan as an unwedded wife, praying her mother's forgiveness, saying that it had been best for her to leave him, as she was not the woman to give him happiness, and promising to write again in a few days and give the mother full satisfaction on the matter of her present position. Then she wrote a second letter, which stated that she was now the wife of George Graham, and that they had been married privately by licence. She prayed again for her mother's forgiveness for the grief of which she had been the cause, and begged to hear speedily that she was forgiven. The letter was post-dated to the day fixed for her marriage with George, and it was her intention to post it after the civil ceremony.

Now that the marriage was settled and she knew what was to be, she was in that state of mind that has such relief from tension as to come near to gladness. She was secured from the possibility of succumbing to the contrary pullings of her own vacillations, the indecision that, at times, she feared would have resulted in her fleeing from this house and casting herself at Euean's knees. Her mind was cool now, and even her physical nature seemed to have grateful relief.

She had insisted that there should be the least possible delay in the legal celebration of her marriage with George. To him she appeared unnaturally nervous, and he tried the calming influence of soothing words, assigning her mental disturbance to the effect of recent events. In truth she was afraid of herself, and his attempts at smoothing her fretfulness merely increased that feeling to irritability. She looked pale and unwell; she felt weak. No persuasion of his would send her from him for change of air and scene until the day on which they had fixed to leave Brighton together. His position as an active director of the bank had to be taken into account, and he could not speed events as quickly as he would. There were private meetings to be attended, and business to be arranged for the time of his absence. His house and furni-

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ture were to be sold, and he placed these affairs with his agent, determined not to allow them to be a matter for delay.

They had decided on three months of European travel before settling on a future course. Charity had agreed to this hastily, only barring Switzerland: the name haunted her. France was to be followed by Italy; other countries to be decided on from the last point. George would return to Brighton at the end of six months for the bi-yearly meeting of his bank. The bank was to be his only future connection with the town.

He was at his office on an afternoon when Charity, in her boudoir, received an urgent request for a prompt interview from a woman who had declined her name to the servant. The information that the woman was poorly dressed set her at a minute's vain guessing as to who she might be. Before the visitor reached the door intuition gave the name of Eunice French, and she it was who entered:

"Beggin' your pardon, m'm, for coming, but——"

Charity, suddenly flushed, stepped forward as if to embrace her visitor.

"Oh, Eunice, I'm so glad! To think that you should come to see me!"

The woman exhibited a moment's confusion, but stronger than evidence of this Charity, looking carefully at her, saw tragic news in her face:

"What's the matter, Eunice? Why have you come?"

"The master, m'm!"

"He's—?"

"He's awful bad—lyin' on nis bed with a kind o' fever, and callin' you by name somethink cruel. It just do tear my heart to hear him."

"Do you mean he's unwell?—seriously ill?"

"And have been for days, m'm. He won't have no doctor—says he wants to die, and if I fetch un he'll pour the physical med'cin' down the sink. I've been so upset I've not knowed if so be I stood on me head or me heels. He's sick worse nor a dog, and has pains all over. I've made him linseed and mustard poultices, but they don't seem to do him no good like. I wish you'd come, m'm, if only for a bit. He keeps all on callin' for you when he thinks I'm not by. He seems to be out of his senses like, and has spots on his face like measles. Not that I be afraid o' them: we was all took with them at home, me and my brother Joe first, then little Jane; but I've been so

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afraid and upset that I thought I'd best come along to you and see what I'd best do."

The woman's disjointed and unsatisfactory story was an electric shock to give Charity rigidity of mind and body. White as old Death, trembling as with chorea, she was momentarily too paralysed to either think or act. Her heart thumped heavily and painfully, and felt as if it were bound by a band of steel; the floor seemed to sway beneath her feet. She caught at the mantelshef to steady herself, drew a breath of pain, and the movement seemed to break the spell:

"You must go back and fetch the doctor to him at once. Take him with you. Never mind what Mr Strachan says. I will be responsible. When is the next train?"

Eunice glanced at the clock. "I have nearly a hower. Can't you come along o' me, m'm? You'd do him more good than doctor's stuff, I be sure. His mind be more sick nor his body. I've watched him for weeks and months. He's just done nothink but mope about, and have et no more nor a sparrer. I don't wonder he's took bad."

The listener placed her hand to her head trying to discover the right path to take. Eunice continued:

"Do come, m'm, if only for a bit. I can do for him after that. He wants you—I be sure—like I wanted my Alf Mephram when he took an' run away from me. I think the pain he has must be here."

She placed her hand on her heart, and the action was a dagger-thrust at Charity's own.

"Yes, I'll come—I'll come to-night after dark. No one must know—not even the doctor. Who's with him now?"

"He was sleepin', and I asked Mrs Thorpe if so be as she would stop in the kitchen so's to hear him when he called. She's to say as I've gone to the shop, so he won't guess what I've done."

"You are a good woman, Eunice—better than I am. I'll give you something to eat now, and send for a cab to take you to the station. You must not miss the train on any account."

Tears came to Eunice's eyes. Charity endeavoured to prevent an exhibition:

"No crying, Eunice, or you'll set me off. We have no time for that. If the doctor wants a nurse you must ask him to telegraph for one. Don't forget that."

As soon as Eunice was gone she had a sudden unquenchable desire to look upon Euean, even for a minute—the irresistible desire to speak a word. The wish was so strong that she per-

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ceived that it would be impossible for her to await the evening for its fulfilment. The love for Euean that she had thought interred she now felt beginning to move within her. Its stirring troubled her, and she forced herself to believe that she was glad that her promise to George was irrevocable.

She was probed through, suffering grievously. Was she not running an unwarrantable danger in going to see Euean, even for an hour? No; she was strong, and her promise to George was absolutely stable and irretrievable. She was chained to him for life by a bond as indissoluble as if it had been registered in Holy Church. In chains! It was best so, and she would remember that in going to Euean. She would steal a glance at him while he slept—Eunice had declared that he had times of delirium. She would see him during one of these, and pledge Eunice French to keep the secret. No harm in that; her mind would be satisfied. And the end of her struggle was that she found herself bound to George. She would see Euean to-night, and return to Brighton by the next train.

She dressed herself with trembling hands, then scribbled a note to George:

"I learn that Euean is ill. No one has had the sense to call in a doctor. I have gone to see that he has every attention. You would not, for humanity's sake, object to that. I shall not see him to speak to him, and I give you my solemn promise to come back as quickly as possible. Fear nothing, for this will be the last time I shall see him, and you may trust me."

In a cab she followed Eunice rapidly to the station, and sighted the woman on the platform. Her explanation was in few words:

"I thought it best to come at once, Eunice, and I must get back to-night. We are going away, and I shall be busy with preparations during the next few days."

They seated themselves in a compartment of the railway carriage. The presence of a third passenger precluded Charity from asking all the questions she felt primed to put, and she sank back in her corner to make company of her thoughts.

Her eyes followed the white smoke from the engine trailing past the carriage window, floating as clouds low over the sunlit land spinning away to rear; casting fleeting, ombrous shadows that ran across fields; skipping hedges, separating to cirrus shapes, thinning out and losing substance as they fled; threading woods; flashing by in remnants to be lost in arbours

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depths. But her mind failed to grasp what her eyes sought to convey. It was stunned.

The afternoon was thickening to dusk when they came to Pevensy, and Eunice took the way to the doctor's house. Charity, her face thickly veiled, stepped along the familiar road to the cottage, dimly conscious of those well-known landmarks that she had met almost daily two months ago. She paused at the cottage door, seeking courage to enter, and gained it with a deep breath. A knock brought the attendant watcher. Charity knew the woman as one who had occasionally assisted her before the advent of Eunice French at the cottage.

The terrible anxiety in her eyes resounded in her voice :

"How is Mr Strachan, Mrs Thorpe ?"

"He's sleepin' now, m'm. He've been awake twice shoutin' and out of his senses. I'm glad you've come, for I don't hold with un havin' no doctor. It's my belief he's sickenin' for the fever, his face be that red, and he sweats awful, and have been horrible sick again with cramps. I shall be glad to get home, for I've a family, and don't want them to catch nothink."

"The doctor will be here in a few minutes. Eunice should have sent for him before and taken no notice of what Mr Strachan said. It was very good of you to look after him this afternoon, Mrs Thorpe. Here is half-a-sovereign. I hope that will pay you. You need not mention to anyone that I have been. You may go home now ; I will take your place until Eunice returns."

As soon as Mrs Thorpe had gone she tip-toed the stairs and listened outside the bedroom door. Euean was breathing heavily : he seemed to be asleep still. She turned the handle and entered.

The room was darkened by a drawn blind, and she had to look about for a candle and matches. Before she struck a light she moved to the side of the bed and assured herself that he still slept. It was too dark to see his face, and she went outside the room to light the candle so that the scratching match might not awaken him. With her hand shading the flame she returned to the side of the bed.

The blankets and sheet were thrown back from the upper part of his body, his nightdress was open at the neck and she saw that he breathed and slept uneasily. Taking a closer view she was alarmed to observe that his skin was hot and dry, that his face, neck and chest were mottled by red patches, that, by coalescence, gave his face the appearance of being masked with a thin skin, tight-stretched and inflamed. Her

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unconsidered impulse was to place her cool hand upon his forehead. The action disturbed him, his head tossed sideways, and, his eyes still closed, he began to mutter, now with clearness, now incoherently :

"No, not that—I wronged you—wronged you, Charity, dear. Forgive—the man is ill—I'll bring him food, Charity.—He must have a doctor.—My poem is finished—the world will shout—you shall be rich. I'll give you all Graham can.—Oh, God!—not sent back!—it's too good to be sent back!—I won't see the doctor, Eunice; it is the man—the man in the van, Charity.—Do you hear?—Come back and forgive.—I struck you, but I've suffered.—Eunice knows; I saw her look at me.—Water, Eunice! No, not food; give it to the man in the van—it is his child.—Water, I say!"

A quintessence of agony gripped her as she turned to get the water he cried for, and as she held his head, while he drank greedily, he opened his eyes and stared blankly at her. He closed them again without knowing who tended him, and as she laid his head on the pillow a low moan of mental pain escaped her lips.

He was comatose again, and placing the candle on the floor to keep the room in shadow, she sat by the bed inwardly praying for the speedy coming of the doctor. She had intended leaving the house while the physician was with his patient, and, on his departure, return and learn from Eunice the result of his diagnosis. Now her anxiety allowed no room for prudent considerations of this kind, and she sat rigid with her nerves a-stretch.

Her roving glance took in the cold sadness of the little bedroom, and she shivered as with a chill. Beyond the bed it was furnished with a small dressing-table, a washstand and two chairs that did not match. The half-worn oil-cloth, and the thin rug by the side of the bed, were noted as distasteful details, and the thought of the nights when the oil-cloth had struck cold to her feet before she got into bed. There was a photograph of herself on the mantelshelf; she remembered sending it to Euean on her return from Switzerland, and she had a pang in observing that he still kept it. Then she noticed the water jug, with its broken lip, standing on the floor by the washstand. It had stood in the same place on the day she left this room, and thinking of her own Bohn toilet ware at George Graham's house she shuddered again.

Her sentinel ear caught the sound of footsteps in the road outside, and she guessed them for those of the doctor. She

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left the room to spend a waiting time in the garden until his departure when she might learn from Eunice the nature of this strange illness. She dare not meet the doctor, with whom she had had some slight acquaintance during the days she lived at Pevensey. At the bottom of the staircase she found Eunice with news of his immediate following. She enjoined the woman to say nothing concerning her presence and, at his arrival, she passed through the back door into the garden.

From there she watched the bedroom window, and observed the shadows flit across the ceiling as the candle was moved within. She felt as if she held her breath in the acuteness of her anxiety. Never had time seemed so leaden as those few minutes in which she watched with the mental agony of the criminal awaiting the jury's verdict. She moved closer to the window with the idea of hearing the conversation in the sick-room, and, as she did so, she stumbled in the darkness over a flower-bed, saving herself from falling to find that the slight shock had caused her limbs to tremble. She stood still, with no more consciousness of herself than the knowledge that her heart was beating wildly, and that the blood throbbed in her ears.

She heard the murmur of the doctor's voice, and immediately she became desperately anxious to know what he was saying. The strangeness of Euean's illness defied her inexperience, and filled her heart with a terrible dread. Maybe he was dying! She lifted a prayer to be spared that blow.

At last she saw the light dance and flit from the bedroom ceiling, and she knew that the candle had been set upon the mantelshelf. The doctor came downstairs, and she hid herself at the corner of the wall, while he left the house and stepped rapidly into the road. She was in the sitting-room in a flash:

"What did he say, Eunice?"

The woman was sobbing piteously. Charity's anxious face was white. The blood seemed expanding to burst her heart. Her mortal life appeared suddenly dead as she looked with eyes stretched painfully wide upon this symbol of terror:

"Oh, m'm, it's horrible, horrible!"

She stretched her hands to Eunice's shoulders and shook her roughly. Her question was fierce:

"What is it, Eunice? Tell me at once if you do not wish me to throttle you!"

"Doctor says as how he's got the small-pox."

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Charity loosened her grasp and gave a despairing cry :

" Oh no, God !—not that !—you are lying, Eunice ! "

" Oh, m'm, I wish as 'twere a lie. Doctor said as how there was no mistakin' 'em. He knowed what 'twas soon's ever he took the candle and looked. He said as how he had two other people ill with them in the last fortnight—bein' a gypsy man and his wife. Master's got to be took away to the fever hospital at Eastbourne. Doctor's gone to telegraph for the ambulance."

Charity, standing by the table, had sunk to a chair in a condition of semi-collapse. Eunice continued to relate details to ears that were deaf, and a mind that was blank :

" Doctor says as how he must have had 'em more'n three days, and he blamed me for not goin' to him before. I feel that terrible upset I don't think as ever I can forgive myself, though 'twas master hisself as made me promise not to tell nobody."

She paused in speech to weep wretchedly, her apron over her head, her body rocking. In the ensuing silence nothing was heard but the woman's sobs, and the ticking of the mantel-piece clock. Charity, wanting tears, spoke to the woman without looking at her :

" You should have gone to the doctor before, of course, but I cannot see that you are to be blamed."

" Oh, m'm, if I could only think that ! "

" Never mind. Did Dr Bell say how your master could have caught small-pox. Is it in the village ? "

" No, m'm, they ain't. He didn't know by what manner o' means he could have took 'em till he spoke of the gypsies bein' took, and then I knowed how 'twas."

Eunice's tale was a clear one to solve the mystery. Some ten days ago her master had returned from a walk with a request that she should make a parcel of food. He had met a child crying by the hedge side, and discovered that it had dallied behind its parents, gypsies in a van half-a-mile down the road. He had taken it by the hand, and reached the van as it had come to a halt at the minute when the child's mother had missed it. The woman had a sick husband sleeping within, and, speaking tearfully, asked the gentleman to see him and tell her if he thought he ought to have a doctor. He had entered the van and spoken to the sick fellow, given a shilling and the doctor's address, and fetched them food. For his indiscretion and ignorance of disease he was now paying a penalty.

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Charity listened with averted face, her features pale and set. Then she spoke :

" Is your master still asleep ? "

" Yes, m'm."

" I'm going to see him."

" Oh, please, m'm, you mustn't do that ! The doctor says——"

" I don't care what the doctor said. Please don't tell me ; I don't want to know."

" But, m'm, he——"

" Give me the candle, Eunice."

The woman's weeping increased. Then she brought the lighted candle, and stood in a corner near the door while Charity passed out and up the stairs.

Her one thought was that she might never again see the man who had loved her, who loved her yet, he whom she had so cruelly wronged, and the irresistible desire was to satisfy the hunger in her heart by gazing at him now. She entered the bedroom almost silently, and, shading the candle-flame, stood by his side and fixed her eyes on him with the old fierce look of love. She saw his face outraged by grief and the symptoms of disease, and watched the movements of his uneasy tossing and painful breathing until a film passed over her eyes, her breast heaved and she gave his mouth a sudden mad kiss. Then the flood burst with a violence that it was not in humanity to stem. At this supreme moment of her heart's agony her thought was to save him from waking : she left the room, and, closing the door behind her, descended to the lower chamber, sobbing as she had never sobbed before.

At sight of her agony the grief of Eunice took fresh strength, and with the door of the little room tight closed they wailed as though a twin Niobe stood in lachrymose duet.

" Oh, m'm ! oh, m'm ! "

Woman's grief went to woman's heart. Charity took the mourning servant to her arms.

Violent lamentations were suspended for the indulgence of gossip in grief, to be broken by the noise of wheels in the lane. The ambulance had come, and while the doctor and two attendants brought the patient downstairs Charity watched from the shadow of the hedge. An impulse to step forward and speak with the doctor was a thing hard to curb, but she saw the ambulance drive away and allowed him to take his departure without acceding to her desire.

She returned to the cottage and found Eunice making pre-

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parations to leave by the order of the doctor, who had promptly vaccinated her. The district medical officer had commanded the closing of the cottage for the morrow's disinfecting process. Only now did Charity think of George and her return to Brighton. She looked at the clock :

"It's past ten, Eunice! I've missed my connection at Eastbourne. Surely your clock is fast?"

"No, m'm, it ain't. I put it right by master's watch a-Thursdays. I clean forgot about your train. What shall you do, m'm?"

For a moment the two women regarded each other blankly.

"I shall have to stay at a hotel to-night, Eunice. Mr Graham will be mad with anxiety. I must telegraph. Oh, whatever shall I do? The telegraph office will be closed!"

For a moment she lost control of the power of reasoning. Then she acted. The thought came to her that it would be impossible to remain in the village if she would escape recognition. She would have to pass the night in Eastbourne.

Quickly she bade Eunice good-night, and gave a promise to see her again. Then she went to the station and marched the platform for an hour until the last train to Eastbourne was signalled.

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XL

SHE who needed sleep so much found sleep fled, and in a strange bed of a hotel she passed the night in grief, anxiety and long contumelious passages with herself. Thought was awake and astir within her; she was anxious about George and wondered what he would think when he found that she had not returned as she had promised. She was more anxious still about the state of Euean, and, thinking of him, she decided to call at the hospital in the morning and inquire how he did, after telegraphing to George announcing her safety and intention of returning by an early train.

She left the hotel early and walked towards the front. Wandering along the Parade she was witness of the young morning sun stepping out from the sea, radiant and glowing after the bath. A sense of spring was in the air, according ill with her mood. Potent bursts of sunshine marked the gladness of the day, and from the town trees, which had shaken loose their tresses, the noise of chattering sparrows came to irritate her.

Her footsteps were impatient to take her to the hospital, and only a fear of the unreasonableness of the hour for making her call prevented her from taking a cab. The matron saw her, and her news was that the disease was taking its natural course. Euean was worse; Charity had known that she must expect to hear so, but the hearing came as a blow to a quivering form expecting it. The matron was kindly sympathetic, and in curiosity asked if she addressed Mrs Strachan. Charity gave the name as hers, and went out into the sunlight.

What mattered the lie? Truth disdained further concealment: she was still pathetically in love with Euean. She had lied to the matron; it seemed impossible to do right, and she hugged the thought that her heart was Euean's, was Euean's only, and had never belonged to other man. She could have shouted then that George had not won it from him; that was a thing for joy in the midst of her grief.

She must have solitude in which to think. She walked through the streets that led to the downs, moving as if she carried the burden of age, and pausing often to regain her breath.

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At length she reached the close-cropped turf and sinking to it she looked at the town below which appeared as a huge huddle of roofs, with wisps of smoke straying from its chimneys. Wanting tears, she had none, but she sat in abject misery until she saw a figure ascending the hill. She stood up and moved forward again, keeping away from the white road that wandered over the uplands.

She walked in a lotus land—among the patient loneliness of shaven downs, where a tuned breeze was singing above the golden gorse, dropping to a diminuendo as it hummed through the dense prickly bushes, above which two carolling larks duetted. Lower than the chorus of the wind was the low drone of early bees, busy in the blossom. For leagues the sombre turf was covered in extravagant profusion with masses of the primary coloured bloom. Like gold exuded from the bowels of the earth it lay in beds and patches, scenting the air with honey perfume, warm and sensuous, brightening bravely in long intervals of sunshine.

But she had no heart to avail herself of Nature's offer of peace: she was in anguish—battling, as the struggling Laocoon, in the toils of conscience, and now the bitter waters in her heart welled up and overflowed at her eyes.

For hours she wandered like a cloud, knowing no rest when conscience granted none, and cuddling her remorse. Her heart was let loose, and the pressure of her thoughts sickened her. And the reason of this fever of mental agony was not due to present fear of Euean's state, nor was it remorse on account of her wilfulness in leaping the hedge of human convention to follow the path of instinctive love. It was because she had allowed herself to be tempted from her true course by the dazzling promise of a wayside field whose poppies had withered at the gathering. Now neither poppy nor mandragora could give her forgetfulness, not blot out memory.

Desperately she examined herself for a real, extenuating excuse for voluntarily taking the position as George Graham's assumed wife. Could it be that she had ever had the least love for him? or was it delirium? No; to him her heart was cold. It must have been delirium raised on a foundation of delusion. Her heart had been cold to him all along. She had taken long draughts of the pleasure he had offered her to satisfy her thirst for it, but she had found that quenching thirst did not always bring satisfaction. She had tried her wings, and, like those of Icarus, they had let her fall plump to earth.

Thus she proceeded, reviewing the procession of the manes.

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The rapidly succeeding events of the past few months rose up to pass by. She had been whirled along in a strong current to find that she had become her own gehenna. The cup of happiness she had once possessed was broken beyond the mending, and in its stead she must drink expiation to the lees.

How to expiate her sin against Euean was the matter of her determination. She must leave George, in spite of her promise to marry him. In that she foresaw difficulties terrible to herself and cruelly painful to him. But she would leave him at all costs. She would present the case to him, and confess that she did not, and could never love him. She would have to hurt him who had been so kind to her. He had treated her like a child that has to be indulged with toys and sweetmeats, and she had become sick of the gifts and impatient of the giver. He had strived and suffered and waited for her, and now she must thrust this dagger into the heart that was full of love for her. In the anguish of her mind that she must do this deed she lifted up her right arm to God, her lips parted as though with thirst, and agitation broke out upon her forehead dewily.

As her mind searched the circle of torment the paroxysm passed leaving her trembling. Like the hippogriff she moved on, still feeding herself on agony. Misery and grief blotted the blueness from the sky, the sunlight from the world, and still she strove with herself. She was going to leave George, but she could not return to Euean. She could not do that with honour, and to keep from him was a punishment she owed to herself. She must never see him again. Henceforward there was nothing for her but weariness of flesh; her bosom shivered, but the persistent sensation of self-contempt hardened her determination to meet all that conscience might require of her.

And so her thoughts pursued their recriminatory path. Looking backward through the atmosphere of time she could not but think that she had suffered greater unhappiness than most women; of that she was assured. The memory of her mother swam up on her tears—that good, overburdened, narrow-minded mother who had feared for her girl's crusade into a world of pitfalls and temptations. Yet she had no regret for having embarked on that crusade; she felt no guilt on that score. She could not expect her mother—brought up as she had been—to see with her vision. She had a feeling of softness and pity for her, who must now know all. But her convictions had been honest, she had set out to conform with

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the institutions, but the chances had been all against her, had prevented her from living up to those moral convictions of the world which she had been only too willing to adopt. Her view of the unmarried woman's need had led her to precipitate ways—had coached her in the practice of her feminine arts to secure the end which the disabilities of her circumstances had not schooled her to wait for. Was a woman to be ranked with outcasts and criminals because Nature urged her to live her woman's life? Nature was her self-defence; and Nature has no reasoning power. So far she could justify her conduct. In martyrdom to her cause she would have been a saint, but she found that she had loved to be a sinner. She had to admit herself put out of court when she remembered how she had succumbed to the temptations of wealth, luxury and pride. It was on that point that conscience stirred her to the depths, so that her soul cried out at the wretched record of her sins. And now she found that she, who had loved praise and admiration, and the flesh-pots, on which so many of the undeserving of her sex fed, desired love most, and the love she would have she had spurned and could not take again. She who had lived for love and pleasure found that she could possess neither. What an ending!—what an appalling ending!

If Euean were to die! As she dwelt on the possibilities, so strong against him, her grief reached to the clouds. Would Heaven spare her that blow she would count herself happy in the eternal bitterness of her cup of remorse. He must not die!—O God, he must not die! That was the prayer sweated from her heart, and uttered aloud in agony—almost as a demand—by her dry lips. Any punishment for her, O God!—she would face the powers of hell—but not death for him whose wife she was in Heaven's sight, and whom she loved so much.

And if he lived? She would never see him again, whether he lived or died. She had deliberately put him out of her world—he was dead to her already. The brief years of her life with him—the blessed remembrance of her prime of love—flowed back to her as a medley of memories: the meeting in Switzerland, his love told by rushing waters, the moon-washed slopes of the mountains as they sat in the grounds of the Swiss hotel, that terrible scene in London when he had told her that he was wedded to an adulteress, the rapidly succeeding events that led to the beginning of their life at Pevensy, their struggles there, and his toilsome hours passed in the dimly burning light of the lamp, and how he had sometimes worked through the night until the flame of the lamp was gone sick in

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the broadening light of day. Then the occasional riots of violent pleasures succeeded by her impatience at his non-success, their differences and quarrels followed by intervals of peace, happiness and caresses, to the time of the final disruption. She thought of all this, and more, as the preternatural quiet and solemnity of the downs overspread upon her and emphasised her present loneliness.

As the ascetic drives spikes into his flesh she drove the iron into her soul. She had renounced love for pleasure, and now love was avenging itself. There was no more pleasure, no more happiness for her. She had cried out to the merciless heavens, that in being crucified for the cause she had at heart she had gained the martyr's true cross of honour, and the answering echo was the terrific boom of the moral. Yesterday must be buried ; to-day wore a sable pall.

The struggle was over, and she was braced to face future pain. She swallowed threatening tears, and retraced her steps, anxious now for her ordeal with George. She was going to him humble, without respect for herself, and disrobed of her old spirited condition. That was dissolved into air as the smoke of the engine that drew her nearer to George was whirled away to nothingness. Thus, her ideals torn down by the ruthlessness of events, she renounced the deceptive chimeras of pleasure and ambition—even love itself. As she thought of the coming meeting she felt that sense of enfranchisement that comes to one taking religious vows and bidding farewell to the world.

XLI

SHE presented herself to George a painful parody of the woman he had known yesterday ; a few hours had withered her, as an inordinate sun shrivels summer roses. He had prepared a reproof for her manner of leaving him, without the permission he considered he was entitled to refuse or give, but when he saw how ill she looked he was startled, and alarm thawed the mild reproach he had ready for her. She sank to a chair without taking off her outdoor garments.

"What has happened, Charity ? You look quite ill."

"I've had no sleep, George. I was sorry I could not return last night, but in my anxiety I forgot how time was passing. I hope you'll forgive me. I should have come back by the first train this morning only I went to see how Euean was. He is very ill. They have taken him to the hospital."

"Poor fellow ! It must be serious. You have not told me what is the matter. I'll ring for luncheon while you talk ; it is long past the proper hour, and you look quite exhausted."

"It is more serious than I thought. He has small-pox, and the doctor says that he is not yet in a position to know how it will go with him."

Tears were in her voice. George had a sudden startling flush in his face :

"You did not go near him, I hope, Charity !"

"Of course I did, George. I went on purpose to help him."

She saw him go white as death.

"You must have been mad ! Good God, you may be infected yourself ! Didn't the doctor warn you of the risk you ran ?"

Her own white face was slightly pink.

"I kept out of his way. I never thought of the infection—I've been so worried—dazed. I suppose I ought not to have come into the house after seeing him. What ought I to do ?"

"You must see Dr Thorne at once ! Oh, Charity, what shall I do if you become ill ? You are all I have to live for !"

His question was a cry. He rang the bell violently.

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"Don't worry, George. I'm not worth it. I don't seem to mind whether I take the disease or not. I've been the cause of nothing but misery. I want to talk to you."

"I'll not listen to anything until the doctor has been. Pattenden shall take a message.—No, I'll telephone. I've had a foreboding of evil ever since I got your note yesterday. If you are ill I shall never forgive myself for not following you and bringing you back. You had no right to go and see Strachan without my consent."

"I should have gone whether I had had your consent or not, George. I could not help myself. I've lived in hell during the last twenty-four hours."

He was in no humour to listen to her at any length until the doctor had been. He sent the servant away and went to the telephone. Then coming back he paced the room anxiously, plying her with questions the while, constantly leaving her to cross the hall to the front door for signs of the doctor's arrival. He came in half-an-hour, and Charity was promptly vaccinated. A few directions and he left. George gave a deep sigh :

"Thank God! And now there shall be no more running away. You shall make inquiries by telegraph if you wish. It would kill me if anything happened to you before we were married. Two days, my love! Until then I'm your close attendant."

She shrank in her chair. His words were like a whip to raw flesh. She had to speak to him but had no words to begin. He spoke of luncheon.

"I don't feel that I can eat anything, George. Give me a glass of wine. I have something to say to you."

"Talk during luncheon, sweetheart. I declare you quite frightened my appetite away when you told me where you had been. You must eat a little. We'll drive this afternoon—unless you'd rather sleep."

"I must speak to you at once, George. It would only increase my unkindness to you to wait longer."

Colour again flooded his face. He was awakened by the prescience of something fearful.

"What do you mean, Charity! You have no other fright in store?" A thought struck him: "Ah, I forgot—you have seen him!"

"Yes, George, and I want you to give me my freedom."

His power of thought seemed to go. His colour fled, and he clenched the back of his chair by which he stood. To her the pause seemed eternity.

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"I never will, Charity! You must be mad to ask such a thing."

"I don't know if I am or not, George. It does seem a strange thing to say to you. I only know that I must go."

"And leave me alone? You don't mean to go and leave me when I love you so much, when I have waited so long, and have suffered so much to gain you? You are not so cruel as to wish that!"

She was weeping silently, and it was with difficulty that she answered him:

"Oh, George, I know that I am cruel. That is what is hurting me. You have been so good, and now to leave you is the most cruel thing I can do—but I must go. You'll never forgive me; I shall never forgive myself. I ought to be dead."

He began to look at the matter in a small ray of hopeful light:

"Come, dearest, this is all nonsense! You are overstrung. Go to your room and lie down. Want of sleep has distraught you."

"If you could only see my mind, George, you would know how firm I am. Please release me from my promise to marry you, and try to forget me if you can. I am not worthy of you. That will always be my thought."

Her persistency alarmed him:

"As sure as God is in heaven I cannot see your motive. You don't love Euean Strachan?"

But for her weeping she was silent.

"Answer me, Charity! You don't love him? You can't! You have told me a dozen times that your love for him was dead. Remember how he treated you."

"Oh, George, George!"

"You do love him?"

She inclined her head gently.

"Good God! and this is how you reward me for all I have suffered! This is terrible—terrible!"

"I deserve all your reproaches, George."

"My God, I shall go mad! Do you know what this means to me? You can't have thought of that."

"I have thought of everything. My whole life will be spent in thinking of what I have done."

"And what of mine?—I see it all now! You have never loved me, and I have been blind all along. You promised to marry me because you thought that my defeat at the election

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was due to you, and you wished to recompense me for it. That was noble ! Tell me, have you ever loved me ? ”

“ I have tried hard, George—so hard.”

The bitterness of his laugh was the cutting of a saw in her heart :

“ Tried ! Yes, I believe you have tried. And you have pitifully failed. That is not your fault, I suppose. Oh, that the love of men should be so great as to urge them to believe that the object of their love has love as strong as their own !—You hit me hard, and now you want me to let you return to live with Euean Strachan ? You must give me time to think.”

“ I shall not live with him, George. I shall go away when he is well—far away. Perhaps I shall go into business again. I think that I was really happiest when I was at Masons’. It is true that I love Euean, but I shall punish myself for the way in which I have treated you and him by going away. My principles have led me to become reckless of the conventions. I still think that I was right, because Nature’s laws are imperious. My sin was in leaving Euean. He was my husband, he is my husband now ; it is against him that I have sinned the most—more than against you. You must look at it in that light, George. I thought myself brave in doing what I have done, but I find that I am the most craven of cowards. I have been thinking and weighing my actions, and I felt that it would be better to hurt your feelings now by telling you that I can never love you, than allow you to marry me and find it out for yourself. Forget me, George, and marry some good woman who is worthy of you.”

“ I marry you or no woman, Charity.”

“ It is foolish to talk like that. You cannot marry me for I could never belong to you, George. I have tried to think that I was yours, but it was no good. You are not the man I can love. I thought I could once, and I lied to you. Your generosity and dear kindness to me when I was in trouble with Euean, and the advantages which I thought a life with you would have, tempted me in the hour of my trouble, and I could not resist the temptation. I have had to pay for it ; I shall have to pay for it every day of my life.”

“ Haven’t I made you happy, Charity ? ”

“ Never really happy ; you have done your best—no man could have been kinder—no man ! but your kindness has never been able to win my love, though it has won my admiration and respect. I have laughed, I have been merry, but my heart never has been. During the few months we have lived to-

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gether I have experienced a whole lifetime—a time without love, and I have come to realise that I cannot find happiness in perpetual enjoyment. Once I thought otherwise, but now I see my error. I know that all this looks as if I had no heart, but you are too good for me, and I am convinced that I could never make you happy.”

He groaned, not knowing how to reply, and his face was set in lines of bitter anguish. Then he spoke :

“ Have you thought what people will say if you leave me ? ”

“ I only care what they say so far as their talk will affect you—but you will go away, perhaps ? ”

He laughed bitterly :

“ Whether I stay or go I live in the same place—that is hell. Oh, Charity, Charity ! ”

She began to whimper :

“ Oh, I’m so sorry, George ! I wish you could be comforted.”

“ Only you can comfort me, Charity ; and that is by staying with me. Stay, my darling, and I swear to make you love me. Let me implore you to stay ! I can’t part from you, my darling ! God help us ! Let us think this over. We will speak of it again to-morrow. We shall both be calmer then. I’ll be satisfied to live with you as a brother if you will only promise to stay.”

Her sobs came from a broken heart, and he went to place his cheek against hers. She shut off the contact by covering her face with her hands.

“ I have thought it over, George. It would only make things worse to wait ; I am cruel, but I cannot help it. All must be ended between us.”

His voice foundered hopelessly :

“ All ended ! ”

She bent her head again, the handkerchief at her eyes. He was sunk in a gloom of thought, and some minutes passed before Charity spoke :

“ It is best that you should give me my freedom now. To spend time in thinking about it would only make it worse for you, and would not alter my decision. That never can be altered. Have pity on me and let me go to my punishment.”

“ I look upon ourselves as married already, Charity.”

“ That is a point of view with which I do not agree. A true marriage must have love on both sides. It is not so with us. If there is sufficient excuse for it two people ought not to be tied together for life. Where one of them does not love

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it is only living in sin—that is what I have done. The true marriage is when two people who love live together, whether they are tied by law or not."

"It distresses me to hear you say that you look upon yourself as having been my mistress. I have regarded you as my wife. God knows that."

"That is where I have been so cruel to you, George. It is I only who have been immoral ; never think anything else. I came knowing that I was taking a false position, but as I thought that I had loved you once I hoped that love for you would return. Now I see my mistake. People who make mistakes often have to bear the punishment of sinners ; I have both sinned and made a mistake. Say that you'll let me go of your own free will after what I have told you."

Suddenly he covered his face with his hands, and a gush of grief came to relieve the tension of his heart. She saw him wrenched with agony, his shoulders shaking, his manhood spilled in hot tears. Never before had she witnessed that most pitiable spectacle of human misery, a strong man's sobs ; and her own tears were flowing fast because she knew how much he loved her, and because her own love was so poor a thing that nothing he had been able to do, no showing of his love had been able to win hers. The miserable meanness of her conduct bore down on her like an avalanche when she saw the great grief of this man with a broken heart, and she felt as if her own heart was shedding tears of blood. Yet she had as little practical pity for him as she had for herself : pity of that kind was beyond her power.

To him, who thought that he had overcome the barrier that had been between them, this moment seemed more poignant than his manhood could endure. He had thought to make her part of his substance, to make her one with him in all things, and his love was for this end ! He had not anchored her heart, he had won only her gratitude and admiration. Now had come this terrible awakening from his dream, and he found that they were as far apart as zenith and nadir. Life that, yesterday, had seemed so good and full of hope was, to-day, life in hell, and heaven as far from him as from the damned.

He went to her and took her hand :

"We have had some happy days together, Charity, dear."

To her it seemed that he was searching for some little comfort in recollections of the past : and the plaintive words fetched up a fresh flow of tears :

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"Yes, George—but they were days I did not deserve. I have always tried to appear perfectly happy, but I have always thought of the black cloud near at hand. There will be no more happy days for me."

"You may come back to me?—in a month or two, perhaps? If love comes to you, you may."

There was no hope in his voice. She shook her head:

"It will never come, George. I have only really loved one man. I can never love another."

"At least you will write and tell me what you are doing."

"No, George. It is best that we have no communication. The parting must be as complete as if one of us were dead."

He had not said the word that would give her release, nor could he bring himself to say it. Again she asked.

"I cannot say go, Charity. You are a free agent. The action must rest entirely with you."

She paused before speaking:

"I would like to know what you are going to do, George—to know if you will leave Brighton. It would be some small comfort to me."

"I cannot say. I have no plans now. I expect that I shall travel. I do not think that I could bear to live in this place. It would be worse than if death had taken my wife. I shall never be able to forget."

"You must be brave. Time will help."

"My love has been too strong to be effaced by time. Only death can wipe out the recollection of it."

"Nothing but death will efface my own thoughts, George. I think we can manage to part without raising the suspicion of the servants, or any of your friends. My boxes are already packed for the trip we were to have taken together. I can take them with me—or you can send them on to Eastbourne, and if you go away to-morrow as we had intended they will only think that I have gone on before you. You may as well spare yourself the pain of knowing that people are talking."

"You wish to go now—at once?"

"Yes, it will be easier for both of us."

He spoke with helpless, mournful resignation:

"Well—if it must be. God bless you, Charity."

He looked into her eyes, then bent his head to her:

"Kiss me, Charity—the last."

She held up her face to meet his, then drew it back quickly. The sudden thought had come to her that it would be wrong to

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kiss the man for whom she had only just declared that she had no love. Her love for Euean would not permit a thing that by propriety was no other man's due. Her declaration of her true feelings was the barrier to a token that George could not rightfully expect, and, this being so, she revolted from the outrage of submitting her lips to one whom her love disowned.

"Forgive me, George. We ought not to do that after what I have told you. It would only add another wrong to what has been done already."

His face had flushed faintly :

"If you think so I will not press it."

"It will only make it worse to part, George. Now let me go. I shall think of you very often, and of your great kindness. That I can never, never forget. God alone can reward you for it."

"For what I have done I have had my reward. There should be no feeling of indebtedness on your part. It would pain me to think that you had any."

"I shall never forget. Good-bye, George."

She held out her hand.

"You must have the carriage. Let me take you to the station."

"No, thank you. I would rather go alone; it will be easier. I shall sleep in Eastbourne to-night. I stay there until I know how Euean is going on, and then I shall go north and stay with my sister until I get something to do. I shall not see Euean again."

"Good-bye then, Charity. Good-bye, my poor, dear girl. I have your miniature, and your face is printed on my heart."

She smiled faintly, close to tears again, and they clasped hands. Then he felt a sharp cramp in his heart as she took off the wedding and marquise rings he had given her and placed them on the table. Next she swept the room with a swift glance, tremblingly pulled down her veil and moved towards the door. He followed to see her go, but in the hall he found himself unable to contain his distress. It burst from him, and he had to turn his back upon her and return to the morning-room. Charity heard the paroxysm as she left the house for ever, and, crushed by his misery and magnanimity, she, too, could no longer keep down the inward riot of her grief.

XLII

SHE was very weary, and her great desire was to go to bed and sleep. Her eyes burned, her head ached, her brain was dull and she felt incapable of spurring it to further action until she had given it rest in sleep. Even her anxiety to know how the day had gone with Euean could not prevail with nature to take a denial of its due, and in the train to Eastbourne she sank into a condition of semi-coma. Her mind had been relieved of a part of its burden and now was quiescent. She felt this mental dullness as a relief to her physical nature. If only she could sleep!

For the next few days she wished to be as near to Euean as possible. She had intended to walk and find a lodging, but, wanting energy, she sought the aid of a station porter, and asked for a direction to rooms in the near neighbourhood of the hospital. The man named a possible terrace; and she stumbled into a closed cab, and was driven through well-lighted streets—lights of lamps and shops, that she had always loved to see, seeming to flash upon her eyes with a painful, wearying monotony. Too tired and dispirited to indulge her natural feelings of nicety she ordered the cabman to stop at the first lodging that offered itself. Within the house she felt that she had no energy to remove her coat, but unpinning her hat, she sat down on a chair, collapsed in an exhausted heap. At the expression of her wish the woman of the house unlocked her bag and took her slippers and night garments therefrom, then went to fetch the basin of hot bread and milk she desired. She returned to find Charity still sitting in the chair, and thinking she looked unwell offered to help her to undress.

"Thank you; you are very good. I have had a very tiring day, and feel the need of sleep. If you will kindly help me with my dress I think I shall be able to manage the rest."

"What time shall I call you in the morning, m'm?"

"You need not trouble to call me. I shall sleep as long as I can. Please bring me a cup of tea when I ring the bell."

She fumbled with the fastenings of her clothes, and, too

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exhausted to place them on a chair, left them on the floor where they had fallen. She knelt by the bed to offer prayer, but neither words nor thoughts of petition would come, and she got up and crept to the sheets like a tired animal to its hole. For a few minutes she lay panting. The light was still burning, she had forgotten to extinguish it, and presently she aroused herself to eat the bread and milk, which steamed on a chair by the side of the bed. She took a mouthful, her hand trembling as she lifted the spoon to her lips. Then she put it down with no appetite for more. She had never felt so exhausted, her tongue was dry, and she wondered if she had strength to get up and drink some of the water standing on the washstand. Endeavouring to summon resolution to her aid she fell into a semi-dozé.

The next morning she was aware of a feverishness and a strong disinclination to get up. She put these symptoms down to an overwrought nervous condition, and thinking that she must go and make an inquiry as to how Euean had passed the night she fell into a shallow sleep from which she awoke an hour later, startled by the consciousness that the morning was well advanced. She left the bed and became aware of an unpleasant dizziness, and such was her medical knowledge that she regarded her physical feeling as being due to the vaccination of the previous day. She rang for tea, dressed painfully, then walked listlessly to the small-pox hospital.

There she saw the matron, and was informed that Euean's disease was developing, and that she must not expect to hear of an improvement in his condition for several days. She expressed the wish to call again for the relief of her mind. The matron sympathetically offered to give her accurate information of the progress of the malady, and realising that this was the best comfort to be expected for the next few days she took her leave.

She would have liked to make an inquiry every hour of the day, but aware of the impracticability of such a course she had to satisfy herself with morning and evening calls, always to learn no more than that the disease was taking its prescribed course. For the next few days she had nothing to do but brood and agonise. She was ever losing herself in thinking. She made two or three attempts to write to her sister Faith to say that her intention was to visit her during the next fortnight, but she found herself wanting in spirit to finish the letter, and deciding, at length, that she would postpone it, until she had more satisfactory news of Euean's

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health, she, for the time being, banished further thought of the letter.

Her nights were times of bitter torment, and she always went to bed anticipating hours of sleeplessness. When she slept it was lightly, as if benumbed, and often she would awake with a start from a nightmare of Euean. On these occasions her forehead pearly with perspiration, the beating of her heart quickened to painfulness, her throat tightened and terror almost strangled her. Then as she realised where she was, and became calmer, nervous crispations twitched the muscles of her face. She tried to reseek sleep, but almost immediately she began to think of Euean and George. So loud became the crashing of her thoughts that sleep fled far, she tossed upon the hot pillow, painfully aware of wakefulness in all her limbs, and the nightmare was intensified in her waking vision.

She sat up, turned and smoothed her pillow, threw off part of the bedclothes, and rearranged the blankets and sheet. Then, cooler, she settled down, endeavouring to keep her mind a blank. Weariness began to relax the muscles of her body, dullness came upon her limbs and crept to her brain, she was aware of the slow departure of feeling, and in comfortable benumbedness she sank into a grateful doze. But her mind would allow her body no long rest, and conscience stole back to plague her. She awoke suddenly on the verge of a dream, trembling in all her limbs. She had fancied that she saw Euean lying dead, his body stiff and shrivelled, his face fixed as a mask, and her heart was painfully sick and lonely. Panting and perspiring she sat up in the bed. The night was around her, sad and dark, and she was without hope for the morrow. With a groan she sank back on the pillow, and allowed her thoughts to have their way.

They were of Euean nearly always. Anxiety for him stormed her, and she began to weep wretchedly. Her grief was silent, the tears falling fast and splashing hot upon her half-bare bosom. She could not bear this purgatory of dragging nights and days, and he not knowing how she loved him. Love she must have, but the bitterness of her conscience for denying it was unendurable. Again she saw Euean lying on his bed, she saw him dying, she found herself listening to his hard irregular breathing—she saw him dead! As her imagination pictured her desolate life without the man she had not known how to value, and its terrible loneliness, she grovelled on the bed in utter abandonment to grief.

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In daylight she wore her misery as a queen wears purple robes. None who saw her face, a plaster cast for composure, would have guessed that there were troubled and obscure places in her heart. In the presence of her landlady she sometimes had forced intervals of brightness. Those who had known her would have said that her spirit seemed to have suddenly grown old, but that her heart retained something of its youth. It was only when alone that she exhibited signs of restlessness. Then she became uncomfortably erratic, she could not keep still, she knew not what to do to pass away the time. In the privacy of her room she was more than ever conscious of the feeling of sickness at her heart. She would move from chair to chair, and from chair to window, endeavouring to lull her grief in the secret cradle of her brain, and suffering horribly. Plainly, she was out of health, out of heart, haunted by the spectre of misery, and dumb misery and anguish wept frequently and freely.

Every day she awaited anxiously the hour of her visit to the hospital. Reading she found to be impossible; her landlady's attempts to coax her to conversation she often met with signs of impatience. She had no desire to go into the open air, except at the times of making her inquiries about Euean, and she spent the greater part of each day in her room in a condition of semi-lassitude.

Thus, her mind unhealthy and half-benumbed, she passed the day. Her nights were generally feverish and full of thought. She endeavoured to mature plans concerning her future, but these were always abandoned before they reached fruition; she felt that she could arrive at no conclusion until she knew of Euean's fate.

One evening she returned from her customary visit to the hospital, and retired to bed at an earlier hour. She was really unwell. She was aware of an acuter recurrence of her physical feelings of the first night she had passed in her lodging, and she began to think that the vaccination was affecting her abnormally, owing to the absence of her normal condition of health. She was decidedly feverish, had a presentiment of coming nausea, was aware of a dull headache. She desired sleep, but instead of sleep she lapsed into a condition of half-consciousness, during which she perspired freely. Thus she remained for half the night, painfully conscious of the longing for the sleep that would not come. This eternal wish for sleep became so vivid that the very process of thinking of it made her restless,

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and she began to toss in the hard bed, growing more wakeful and heated as the long-drawn hours passed like years. She was aware of a pain in her back that grew more and more intense, and an increasing thirst that she had not strength to get up and quench. Thinking of sleep seemed to increase her headache, and she was cognisant of a growing sense of sickness, and sweats, that the conscious helplessness of her position seemed to make more copious. Then she had a culminating feeling of sickness, and, with a supreme effort, she got up and left the bed on shaking legs. The violence of the attack left her weak and trembling, she lay on the floor utterly impotent from the succeeding exhaustion, and the sudden fear that her present condition, hitherto attributed to the effects of vaccination and over-fatigue, would keep her from going to inquire about Euean in the morning, was the first suggestion to her mind that she might, herself, be sickening for the disease that held him victim.

The thought half-paralysed her with terror, but her native pluck was her aid, and she got up and staggered to the bell. She rang it violently, again and again, the moment to the evidence of its answering seeming an hour in the passing. When the knock came at her door she was lying, prostrated, across the bed, aware of returning sickness and the invading of bodily pain. The landlady's husband knocked again. She called her answer feebly :

"I am afraid I am ill. Please go for a doctor, and send Mrs Thorne to me. Be quick, please."

In her almost certain knowledge that small-pox had marked her for a prey her fear was that she might die without seeing Euean and asking his forgiveness. She became agitated. Too weak to re-enter the bed she lay stretched across the outer coverlet, in her thin nightdress, panting, hot and chilled by turns.

Her landlady entered the room, sleep in her eyes and alarm in her face. The violent evidences of Charity's illness, and her helplessness needed her assistance, and she helped her into bed. The doctor came in less than an hour, and seemed perplexed until Charity helped the diagnosis by suggesting the disease. The woman left the room in horror, and the doctor summoned her husband to fetch a nurse.

In the early hours of the morning the ambulance that had conveyed Euean to the hospital drove up to the lodging and took Charity to the place where her lover lay near to the door of death.

XLIII

IN a close and semi-darkened ward, smelling of disinfectants, she sank daily nearer that same door, showing but small fight against the power of the adversary that was bringing her lower. Then came a noticeable abatement in the febrile symptoms which had ushered in the malady, and she had a lucid interval. The characteristic marks of eruption had developed on her face, which was heated and irritated. Her thought was of Euean, and she asked how he did, fearing the answer. The nurse came to her bed, and Charity asked for the news she dreaded in a breaking voice that was thin, worn and grating.

"He's better, Mrs Strachan, he's recovering——"

"Oh, thank God! thank God for that!"

For a moment she paused in thankfulness; then a new fear troubled her:

"Is he marked? No, that would be cruel!" She stayed, shuddering. "But I'll love him all the same; it shall make no difference! Can you bring him to me?"

"You shall see him in a day or so if you promise to be quiet."

"Is he able to get up, nurse?"

"He is only weak. Dr Pratt hopes to allow him to go away in a few days."

There was a pause. Charity was thinking. Then she spoke:

"I am very ill, nurse?"

"We hope that you will have a good turn during the next few hours."

There was another marked interval.

"Do you think I shall die, nurse?"

The nurse's pale face became slightly pink.

"Oh, no!—you mustn't talk like that! We hope to pull you through—Dr Pratt is very clever. You are having the best skill and attention here. Try to sleep now. Dr Pratt will come soon."

For the remainder of the day she was very restless. Mind as well as body shared the condition, for she was thinking about Euean and was desirous of seeing him. She wanted to ask his forgiveness for the past, and yet she dreaded the pain

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of the meeting. She passed the next day in similar dread, feeling as if life were but a flickering thing within her, and yet unable to make up her mind to ask for him. Then, one afternoon, she had a great fear that she might die without seeing him, and suddenly she cried out :

" Please bring Mr Strachan to me, nurse."

" I'll see. I must go and ask the matron. Mr Strachan knows of your being here, and is waiting for the doctor's permission to come to you. You must be quite quiet while I am gone."

The doctor came at that moment, and an undertone consultation was held outside the door of the ward. Charity, her ear very acute, heard the whispers without the words, and, under tension, her nerves vibrated like the strings of a harp ; she could have screamed. The doctor entered and looked at her :

" I have sent nurse for your husband, Mrs Strachan, but you must not allow yourself to be excited, or you may do yourself considerable harm. Nurse will give you a little brandy."

" I will be quiet, doctor. I think I'm better. Please let him come quickly."

The minutes of waiting were an eternity to bear. She panted visibly, her forehead was dewy. She was now all anxiety to see the man she loved, and ask his forgiveness. The very anticipation of the meeting made her tremble, and she found it impossible to check the shaking of her limbs.

The door opened, and she saw the doctor and nurse leading a man between them. Her heart beat quicker, and she endeavoured to restrain it with her hand as if it would escape. She was too weak to raise her head, but in the glance she took at the shrunken figure, and the features worn by disease, she knew the man she had wronged, and for whom her love now cried.

A film passed over her eyes, and in bitter grief she turned her face to the wall. The doctor spoke :

" You must be very careful to keep her quiet, Mr Strachan. Ring the bell when you wish to call."

The nurse had brought a low-seated chair to the side of the bed, and when she had assisted him to it, and placed the bell at his elbow, she and Dr Pratt left the room. Charity turned to look at him, and a sob escaped her. At the sound he placed his hand on her head :

" Oh, Charity, Charity, you have come back to me ! "

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Her heart vibrated at the sound of the well-known voice, but she could not reply for emotion. He had pushed the chair aside, and was kneeling by the bed, his hand resting gently against her hot face. She had come back, and her mere presence was inexpressibly sweet to him.

"Charity! My darling! You have come back! Something seemed to say you would! You loved me! I have thought that out again and again, dear; and I knew that you would come back, for love will not be denied. Won't you speak to me, my girl? Don't cry!"

"Oh, Euean, I can't help crying when you speak to me like that. I have done you so much wrong that I feel that it is unforgiveable, and now you speak kindly to me! I want to hear you say that you forgive me, Euean. I do not justify my sin—I own it, and therefore it has some claim to forgiveness—and I have suffered. Can you forgive me? I must hear you say that you do to have peace of mind. I know that I shall not get better, and it is the last thing I shall ask of you."

He, too, feared that she might die, and to hear it from her lips caused tears to stream down his cheeks. He drew closer to the bed, and held her in his arms:

"You must not talk so, dearest—there is much hope. I will have another doctor."

"It is no use, Euean. He would only take up the time we may have together. I want your forgiveness to be happy."

"The forgiveness must be mutual, for you have more to forgive me than I have to forgive you. I, alone, am to blame, and I have deservedly suffered. I treated you worse than a brute—I drove you away when you were everything in the world to me—and you were justified in acting as you did. I have come to see that in long hours of remorse. You were wrong in some things, but I was wrong all through."

"Not justified, Euean, dear; nothing could justify my action. You warned me of your temper, and I ought to have remembered that and have thought of your troubles. I have been ruined by ambition, but I have had to pay for it. If you think of that you will forgive me."

"Love seeks no revenge; I do forgive you, dear girl, most sincerely. When I heard how you came to me when I was ill, and I realised that you were here through that visit I thought of nothing but your love for me, and of the joy of meeting you again."

"I did not think of the risk; and now that I am like this I

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can almost feel glad. My pain was in the thought that you might die—and that we might never speak to each other again. If you only knew how I have thanked God for saving you! If you had not got well again my punishment would have been more than I could have borne."

For the next few minutes neither spoke, and, listening to her heavy breathing, he felt that she was occupied with thought. He wanted to ask her how she had come to leave her husband. The hospital attendants' insistence in speaking of her as his wife had deepened the mystery of her presence here, and, seeking the solution, he put the question.

She told him the history of the last two months, with many pauses for breath; how she had left George, but with no intention of going back to live with Euean. He did not speak at the end of the recital, and, expecting him to say something, she turned her head to look at him. He asked how George Graham had taken her departure.

"He was very cut up about it, Euean, but he was very good. He has been all self-sacrifice, kindness and generosity. The cruellest thing to him was the certain discovery that I did not love him, and never could. It was only then that he recognised what a mockery our union was. I was mad to sell myself to a man I could not love—and he so kind! It has torn my heart to hurt him, but it was useless—love would not come."

"I could thank God for that!"

"I am not without gratitude for what George has done, but I feel like the proud person who has received charity. He is one of the good men of the world. He can never be repaid. Don't think ill of him, dear."

"I think he is entitled to my respect, though I hated him when I knew that he had taken you from me. We must be happy together now, dearest. I thought of writing to you just before I became ill. I had some news. My wife died in Spain a month ago—I had a letter from Pardoe, but I could not bring my mind to the point of telling you this—I thought that it might upset your happiness with George."

She did not speak, and, listening to her heavy breathing, he felt that she was occupied with thought. Then she wiped a flow of saliva from her lips. The effort of talking seemed to have exhausted her, and, instinctively aware of this, he proposed to call the nurse, but she forbade him. His head was close to her, and, feebly, she tried to pass her hand across his hair. This little action struck his heart with

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deepest grief in the fear that he might lose her just when she had been given back to him. His heart cried out that she might yet be saved; the terrible necessity for taking some immediate action to this end, and the knowledge that no further action was possible, seemed to set rigidity upon his power of thought, and the despair that he might lose the love he had regained was an intense anguish from which his heart cried to be delivered. Now she was indispensable to him, and he could not hide the fact from himself that he was losing her.

A long silence followed, and he prayed to God till sweat stood on his brow as the visible witness of his anguish. He prayed for a miracle with no hope of its performance, but, a human being in agony, he prayed inwardly as only the agonised can pray. By a feeble movement of the bedclothes Charity recalled him to her immediate wants :

"Give me something to drink, dear. There is a table—and brandy in a glass."

He did as she bade him, and, lifting her head, held the tumbler to her lips. She sank back panting to her pillow, and presently spoke in a voice that was strangely wistful :

"Love me, Euean; I must love and be loved. I need love, I have starved for it long enough."

"I do love you, dear girl--indeed."

He needed her love! The knowledge of that brought peace to her heart, and her smile enfolded him. An extraordinary contentment seemed to spread over her, and love was very soft in her eyes.

"You love me, dear Euean, and I love you—oh, so much! I'm happy! No, do not cry, because that would spoil the happiest hour of my life, and to die when one is happiest is the best of deaths."

She paused, seeming to frame a request :

"There is a hand-mirror somewhere, Euean—on the table. See if you can find it, and bring it to me."

He surmised her object, and, soothingly, made a small objection.

"I wish it, please. I'm sure it's there."

He went to the table, brought her the hand-glass, and sat down again by her side.

"Hold it for me, dear."

He held it in front of her face, while she steadied his trembling hand with her own two. The face on the pillow looked at the face in the glass. She gazed into it with pitiful eyes,

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seeing there her face disfigured and inflamed. She gazed until the big tears fell, and she pushed his hand away. The mirror fell on the bed.

"You are crying again, Charity!"

"I think I must be crying for myself. I feel that I am going to die, but I am glad to die. I could never live with a marked face."

"My poor darling! You must not talk like that. You will ever be your own dear self to me."

"I was pretty once, Euean?"

"Yes, dear."

"You will always think of me as I used to be, Euean—not as I am now?"

"Always, dear. You must not speak of death; you are going to get better. I was as ill as you are now, and I have recovered."

"My hands are not marked at all. See! Kiss them, dear."

He did as she asked.

"I want you to remember me always as the woman of our happiest days, Euean."

"It hurts me to hear you talk like this, Charity, darling. We must be brave. Don't lose your pluck, sweetheart, or I shall give way."

"Give me your hand, Euean. It makes me happy to hear you call me sweetheart."

He gave his hand, and she laid her own contented hand in it. Evidently she had something on her mind, her eyes glittered with a hot light, and there was an uneven trembling in her voice when she spoke.

"I want to ask you something, dear Euean. I should like to die a married woman. Can we get the marriage performed?"

He thought a moment before replying.

"It is doubtful if any clergyman can be persuaded to come here, but I will ask Dr Pratt. I shall have to tell him something of the circumstances. The matter is not one that should trouble you, dear. We are really married as it is; a mere ceremony is nothing—is only a ceremony. But I'll see Dr Pratt now, and then you must try and go to sleep. We have already talked more than is good for you. I shall come again early in the morning."

A smile fluttered on her lips, and he kissed her forehead, and then summoned the nurse. He spoke to the doctor at the door of the ward, and, without giving a reason, asked if

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a clergyman could be found who would come to the hospital.

"I know of one who would come in a case of real necessity. If it is Mrs Strachan's wish I will have him sent for."

"To-morrow will do. She has had enough excitement for to-day. I must see the clergyman alone first."

He returned to Charity and found her much exhausted. To his promise that her desire should be satisfied she gave a feeble nod of gratification, and tried to stretch out her hand to take his. The sudden drowsiness of great weakness settled upon her, and he bent over her to say good-night.

The morrow found her too ill to see him, and for the next few days he remained in his own room, suffering hours of prolonged agony, in the knowledge that every hour she was growing weaker. Then one night he was awakened from a light sleep by a gentle shake. It was the nurse, who requested him to dress and come to Charity at once.

Alarmed and trembling he put on his clothes. When he was ready the nurse came and took him to Charity's bed. A night-light burnt sick, throwing a shadowy cone on the wall. She lay shrivelled up among the blankets, very ill and delirious under the influence of the suppurative fever. Death was weaving a last raiment for her, her hands moved uneasily over the bedclothes, her chest panted, her breathing was hard:

"I must go to him, George.—You have been very good, but I must go. He is ill—so ill!—I can't bear it!—Oh, God! God! have I not borne enough?—Am I not pretty, Euean?—Give me the glass.—My face is all marked—shocking!—Say I am still pretty, dear.—I could not help coming. Don't send me away—don't!—Forgive me—I love you so!"

Grey dawn was creeping stealthily into the room, hand in hand with black death. The raving suddenly ceased, her chest was panting weakly, and to the man standing by the bed, stupefied with grief, it seemed as if her soul were struggling to free itself. He had taken one of her hands in his own, and the faint beating of her pulse appeared to pass into his frame and become intensified in the sobs he endeavoured to stifle. He watched the movements of her breathing, the poor marked face, and the agony was more than he could bear. Suddenly she struggled, and the nurse bent forward and lifted her up. Immediately her head fell back. Charity had kept faith with Nature; and thus was she returned to the man over whom her love was spilled.

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The nurse laid her upon the pillow, and crossed her arms upon her breast. Euean was on his knees by the bed, sobbing wildly. The nurse, tears in her voice, touched him on the shoulder :

"Come, Mr Strachan, you must bear up, or you'll be ill again. Let me help you back to bed."

He shrank at the woman's touch.

"Leave me alone, please. I must stay with her. No one can part us! She is my wife!"

The nurse left the room, and presently returned with the matron. Impotent as an infant Euean allowed himself to be led back to his own chamber. Seated on the bed he turned fiercely to the matron :

"Why wasn't the doctor present? He might have saved her."

"No doctor could have done that. We have all done our best. That should be some consolation to you."

"Ah, yes; forgive me. You have all been very kind."

In the morning the doctor visited him.

"I think it best that you should leave the hospital to-day, Mr Strachan. Change to another scene will do you good. I have seen your servant. Your house is ready for your occupation. We've had to take upon ourselves to order some household linen, as the other had to be destroyed."

"You are very thoughtful, doctor. I can't thank you enough. Yes, I must leave to-day. I wish to make the funeral arrangements myself, and I must communicate with her friends."

The doctor left the room to send for a cab, and Euean sank to a chair. In an hour and a half he quitted the hospital.

An hour later Eunice French met him at the cottage door. She assisted him to alight, and he went to the little sitting-room, where a fire was burning. Eunice's dress made some pretence of mourning, and, unable at present to speak to him of his trouble, she strove to interest him in other things.

"I thought as how you'd like some beef-tea, sir, so I made a drop this morning. Don't ye go for to do anythink for yerself, until you be quite well and strong again. You may be thankful that you're spared, I reckon, though the doctor said as how 'twas a near touch. That gypsy man died, an' afore he'd gone his wife took the small-pox, an' she died, too, an' the poor child has had to go to the union workhouse, so they tell me, an' 'twill be a pauper all its life. The small-pox just

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be a terrible complaint.—There's some letters and a parcel come for you, sir. I took 'em in at Mrs Thorpe's house, where I've been stayin' mortal bad a'most three weeks with the vaccination; an' the postman did say as how he should ask you hisself if you'd got 'em, bein' responsible in a way. I'll hot the beef-tea now. I'd better leave the door open so's you can give me a call if so be as you should want me."

She left the room, and he stretched his hand across the table and took up the parcel. He knew what it was. His manuscript poem, "The Death of Love," had been returned for the last time. Without opening it he took it to the grate and placed the parcel on the fire, pressing it against the hot coals with the poker.

Next, he walked slowly back to the table, and, seating himself, mechanically broke a piece of bread into the basin of beef-tea. Then he pushed the basin from him, crossed his arms before him and laid his head upon them, while from deep down in his chest there came a great dry sob.

THE END